

**Promises to Keep:**  
**Thoughts on an Emerging Bahá'í Theology**

**Jack McLean**

2007

*"True knowledge, therefore, is the knowledge of God, and this is none other than the recognition of His Manifestation in each Dispensation."*

The Báb (*The Persian Bayán*, Vahid 4)

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost ("Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening")

**Abstract**

*This paper advocates certain necessary parameters in an emerging Bahá'í theology. Although Bahá'í theology is still in a formative state, the sub-disciplines of exegesis, critical apologetics and philosophical theology are emerging in piecemeal fashion as the defining functional tendencies of Bahá'í sacred study. While no systematic theology of the Bahá'í Faith has thus far been written by a western scholar, such a theological task should not limit itself to a detached attempt at a monolithic total objectivisation of truth, but should also account for the concrete existential concerns of the spiritual self and the dynamics of spiritual transformation. This paper advocates the recovery of spirituality and the prophetic tradition in any Bahá'í theology and considers the importance of the now neglected "truth claim" to the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith.*

**Introduction**

In one of his letters to a Bahá'í who had questioned him on the nature of "indirect teaching", Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957 CE) distinguished the humanitarian or social teachings of the Bahá'í Faith from those which are "more challenging in character, and are specifically and solely Bahá'í...."<sup>1</sup> While his response did not name theology directly, a plausible interpretation of Shoghi Effendi's

distinction between the social/humanitarian and "specifically and solely Bahá'í" teachings would seem to point to the distinctively religious or theological teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. If this reading is correct, the work of Bahá'í theology would involve certain special challenges, as Shoghi Effendi's qualifier indicates. This paper is devoted to a discussion of some of these specifically religious or theological aspects of the Bahá'í Faith.

By Bahá'í theology, I intend the substance of the Bahá'í Revelation, that is the doctrine, or divinely revealed teachings in the writings of the Founders of the Bábí-Bahá'í Faiths, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and those of their appointed successors and interpreters,<sup>ii</sup> what I have called elsewhere *source theology*. At a lesser level, I intend by Bahá'í theology the commentary of its scholars of religion (*derivative theology*).<sup>iii</sup>

Although it would be premature to speak of "schools" of Bahá'í theology at this time, one would however be justified in pointing to three sub-disciplines or functional tendencies of the field. Exegesis, what Islamic scholars called commentary (*tafsir*), critical apologetics and philosophical theology, appear to have emerged thus far as the three leading formative sub-disciplines of Bahá'í theology. I move now to a few respective considerations of these three areas.

### **Three Functional Tendencies of Bahá'í Theology**

#### **(i) Exegesis**

The source of theology lies in reflection upon both the evidences of Divine Revelation and Holy Writ, for Bahá'u'lláh says: "No breeze can compare with the breezes of Divine Revelation, whilst the Word which is uttered by God shineth and flasheth as the sun amidst the books of men".<sup>iv</sup> He also says that it is "...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".<sup>6</sup> Bahá'í theology, consequently, should be firmly text-rooted, through either direct or indirect reference. The goal of exegesis, moreover, aims not only to discover any literal and figurative sense in the text but also to expand on their wider meaning, thus validating the allusive and comprehensive nature of the Word of God. The Bahá'í *Kerygma* Event (BKE)<sup>7</sup> reaffirms the reality of divine revelation as Holy Writ, that is, as the supreme instrument for world reform and spiritual transformation and as the unsurpassed repository of divine wisdom.

The study of the Bahá'í writings as a personal experience in spiritual deepening may well be consonant with one of the current postcritical trends of a return to a more holistic, interactive reader-oriented and literary/narrative approach to scripture that aims for personal and social transformation, approaches that cohabit uneasily with the older historical-critical method.<sup>8</sup> Bahá'u'lláh in a uncompromisingly emphatic underscores the preeminence of His Person as the "Living Book" to which all other books and scriptures are subjected:

Say: God, the True One, is My witness that neither the Scriptures of the world, nor all the books and writings in existence shall, in this Day, avail you aught without this, the Living Book, Who proclaimeth in the midmost heart of creation: "Verily, there is none other God but Me, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise."<sup>9</sup>

This passage serves as a pointed reminder to scriptural commentators that even though sacred text permanently sets down the verbal forms of divine revelation, the text itself is not the ultimate reality, but rather the Author of the text who is a divine, living Being. This suggests that

both exegete and theologian must transcend a mere cognitive understanding of the text and seek to engage in an interactive personal relationship with the Creator of Holy Writ who is the source of all knowledge and the door of salvation.

In modern times the disciplines of exegesis and systematic theology have become alienated from one another a gap that Hans Küng calls a "misery".<sup>10</sup> For honest systematics can only be carried out in light of the texts, and the historical critical method. In the Bahá'í Faith the collaboration of the two disciplines should remain a close one. On the one hand, systematic theology should rely to a great extent on the findings of exegesis and commentary, and not view them merely as auxiliary, even less, subordinate disciplines. On the other hand, the textual skills of the exegete can find broader applications through the work of the systematic theologian in the phenomena of comparative religion, and in a broad range of theological motifs.

### (ii) *Critical Apologetics*

The "apologetic impulse"<sup>11</sup> that first drove Christian theology has also characterised much of the work of Bahá'í scholars until now. Yet Bahá'í apology is increasingly revealing a harder, more critical edge and should continue to serve as the driving force of the Bahá'í *Kerygma* event (BKE). A strong apologetical impulse is one of the vital manifestations of a rapidly growing world religion, and as apology relates to interreligious dialogue, Paul Griffiths argues that without what he calls "positive apologetics", dialogue becomes "pallid, platitudinous, and degouted."<sup>12</sup> Further, it should be born in mind that apology cannot be reduced merely to justification and defence of the propositions of religion. David J. Krieger makes the point that *Apologia* is implicit in all western worldviews [and sociopolitical systems], either secular or theistic: "...to this day", writes Krieger, "the *pragmatics* of theological thinking, indeed all Western thinking, remain determined by what may be called the *apologetic method*."<sup>13</sup> But religious apologetics is also an attempt to make faith meaningful to a secular world.

In short, Bahá'í apology is responsible apologetics, that is, a non-autocratic, rational, but responsible and faithful transmission of the beliefs of the covenantal community by its scholars to succeeding generations. Bahá'í apologetics, moreover, while it may be committed apologetics, seeks to respect the spirit of the non-normative, non-confessional science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) in the light of confessional faith.

### (iii) *Philosophical Theology*

Bahá'í theology is largely philosophical theology. Philosophical theology as I use it both implies — and does not imply — several strands of meaning. It refers principally to the philosophical analysis and defence of religious beliefs and is thus related to critical apologetics. Philosophical theology is not, at least in this perspective, to be understood in the narrow academic sense as "philosophy of religion", for philosophy of religion may begin from purely rational premises, as a natural theology which excludes divine revelation. Such a philosophy of religion would be consequently incompatible with a Bahá'í world view. However, philosophical theology in a Bahá'í understanding does include a philosophy of life or philosophy of existence which in John Hick's view is beyond the pale of the term "philosophy of religion".<sup>14</sup> The Bahá'í teachings clearly intend to speak to the concrete realities of human existence in all their aspects.

Since the Bahá'í teachings expound meaningful faith and speak to "real life" human conditions in an engaged rather than a detached mode, Bahá'í theology retains a large existential

element and cannot consequently be fully equated with a philosophy of religion that excludes *Existenzphilosophie*. Moreover, the philosophy of religion, that is "philosophical thinking about religion",<sup>15</sup> as Hick points out, may be done by atheist and agnostic alike, whereas Bahá'í philosophical theology underscores an understanding which results from an identity of subject and object. A Bahá'í philosopher of religion who is an agnostic or atheist would be a contradiction in terms, for the divine philosopher in the Bahá'í view must have some experience of the divine, rather than pursuing a mere intellectual curiosity about ideas on divinity.

Philosophy of religion, however, must continue to play its role as an indispensable adjunct to Bahá'í theology, for it sharpens theology's critical sense and deters it from dogmatism, promotes the scientific spirit of free inquiry, and keeps it in touch with the dialectical method which seeks to create a new synthesis for seemingly antithetical points of view. While in Islam, *falásifa* and *'Ilm-i-Kalám* were often at odds,<sup>16</sup> in the modern day Bahá'í Faith, properly philosophical concepts are often imbedded at source, that is in the Bahá'í sacred writings, concepts such as Kant's distinction between the *phenomena* (appearances), the experiential world of the senses, and the *noumena*, the unknown but nonetheless real things-in-themselves, the world of *das Ding an sich*.<sup>17</sup> The numerous philosophical motifs that are patterned throughout Bahá'í scripture<sup>18</sup> indicate, or more properly should indicate, that the outlook of Bahá'í theology, although grounded in revelation, also looks to philosophy as a divine science, particularly to its neo-Platonic and Aristotelian versions to which Islam became so heavily indebted.

The view that philosophy (reason) as much as theology (revelation) leads men to the knowledge of God was held by the Spanish Muslim Ibn Rushd or Averroës (1126-96 CE), one of the protagonists of the so-called "Double Truth" or "Two Truths" theory.<sup>19</sup> Ibn Rushd had a strong influence on the medieval scholastics and especially on the misnamed "Latin Averroists" who were in reality Aristotelians.<sup>20</sup> The great Aquinas was also markedly influenced by Ibn Rushd, whose teachings, along with those of Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980-1033 CE), Aquinas often rejected.<sup>21</sup> However, unlike Ibn Rushd, Al Farabi and Ibn Siná who all prioritized rational demonstration over the fundamentalism of dialectical *Kalam*, Aquinas clearly placed theology above philosophy since theology was "not derived from creatures, but immediately inspired by the divine light" whereas philosophy derived "from notions of creatures".<sup>22</sup> For Ibn Rushd, however, it is the specific function of philosophy to lead seekers to the knowledge of God.

In this unified vision of philosophy and theology, the Bahá'í Faith is consonant with several outstanding contemporary theologians such as Paul Tillich, the last great systematic theologian of the present age, and Martin Buber, both of whom have grounded their theologies in the borderlands with philosophy. Tillich's autobiographical sketch *On the Boundary* as the title indicates, relates that the pivotal point of Tillich's entire life and thought was seen from within the *Grenzsituation* (boundary situation) between philosophy and theology.<sup>23</sup> In the *Eclipse of God* Martin Buber, whose theology was a telling synthesis of classical prophetic faith and modern existential concerns, alluded to a saying of Franz Rosenzweig, that divine truth wished to be implored with both hands, that of philosophy and that of theology.<sup>24</sup> And while Buber sees the I-Thou relationship expressed in its "highest intensity and transfiguration in religious reality", he sees the I-It relationship finding "its highest concentration and illumination in philosophical knowledge."<sup>25</sup> Outside of 'Ali Murad Davudí (dates), former professor of philosophy at the University of Tihiran,<sup>26</sup> one can scarcely speak yet of a great Bahá'í philosopher of note in the West, one who has attracted the notice of the academic community or the reading public, a situation which the twenty first century will hopefully remedy. If the Bahá'í theologian is the proverbial rare bird, the Bahá'í philosopher is even rarer, at least for the moment. [Ishraq-i-Khavari].

## Systematic Theology, Deconstructionism and the “Bahá’í Theologian”

One reads from time to time an appeal for the Bahá’í systematic theologian to emerge,<sup>27</sup> or references to the Bahá’í systematic theology that is to be. Systematics in this view would represent a theological apogee or culmination. While following the classical theological model, the appearance of such a scholar would be highly desirable for a thorough-going and authoritative exposition of the key doctrines of the Bahá’í Faith, the temper of postmodernity remains as yet decidedly unsystematic. Although deconstructionism has not by now had a great impact on theology,<sup>28</sup> it is nonetheless dedicated to what Heidegger had already called *Abbauen*<sup>29</sup> or "dismantling", a "deconstruction" of all systems, theological or other, which have in the meantime been relegated to the hopelessly outdistanced intellectual landscapes of yesteryear, in which once pious or ponderous *speculants* or systematisers lived and moved.

Current Bahá’í theology is also characteristically unsystematic through no intent to dismantle but because it has not yet had sufficient time to construct. Bahá’í theology for the time being is reminiscent of the *genre* — as distinguished from the content — of the writings of the scholastics.<sup>30</sup> The Bahá’í scholars entering the third millennium, like the scholastics who were on the threshold of the second, pursue their theological concerns in piecemeal fashion probing a variety of topical issues. Bahá’í theology is for the present theology *à la carte*.

It remains at this time an open question whether or not Bahá’í theology will become systematic in the sense of the doctrinal mega-system. Kierkegaard who was the prime deconstructionist of his day, critiqued the then predominant Hegelian system of absolute idealism precisely for its being closed, finite and dehumanising in abstracting the "real" human being out of existence. According to Kierkegaard's perspective, theology should never amount to a desertion of *human* in contradistinction to abstract *philosophical* considerations of existence. Kierkegaard's condemnatory question put to the philosophers of his day can apply equally well to any theologian in ours: what is the good of the medicine if it expels the fever but kills the patient?<sup>31</sup> Put differently, the answer must not only solve the question, it must also remedy the condition of the questioner as well. If it does not, it is as useless as a weed.

If a systematic Bahá’í theology or theologies were to emerge as aloof, hermetic, propositional superstructures, such approaches would benefit from a coexistence with more humane, "real" existential and spiritual theologies. Aristotle, for whom theology formed part of the larger study of metaphysics, was right almost two and a half millennia ago when he argued that philosophy must be an investigation of the totality of being *qua* being: "Now, to sum up, there is a single science that must view systematically being as being and whatever belongs to it as being. And the same science examines both primary beings and whatever attributes they have..."<sup>32</sup> Humans certainly qualify as Aristotle's "primary beings", who are above all spiritual *beings*, not just ambulating questions, and it is above all the element of spirituality that makes us both essentially and profoundly human. Aristotle argues for both the system and existence.

Here, I am reminded of Blake's Motto that "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's. I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create".<sup>34</sup> Blake's motto suggests that the great minds have by nature been system-builders, and that rather than analyse the works of others, they create their own. Systematics would have the definite advantage of protecting a "unity of doctrine"<sup>35</sup> of the Bahá’í Faith, but this protection should not be won at the cost of erecting an oppressive monolith which by its monotone silences the voices of diversity.

If and when, then, the Bahá’í systematic theologian does emerge, he or she will hopefully

welcome human existence into the considerations of theology and thereby avoid the monolithic and totalitarian nature that have characterised the thought systems of the past. Although Chairman Mao's political ideology demanded that both the arts and sciences be pressed into the service of Communism,<sup>36</sup> nevertheless his saying of "letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend..."<sup>37</sup> is a welcome indicator of the manifold diversity that should characterise the development of Bahá'í theology. Such diversity appears, moreover, to be the favoured prescription by many present-day proponents of "global theology" or theology *tout court*, as we head into the third millennium. Martin E. Marty writes, for example, in *Theology Today*:

What theology tomorrow calls forth is what I call variously a multiplex, multifocal, multivocal, and multimodel approach. Such an approach attempts to do justice at once to the particularities that do exist and the universals that both world survival and, in the present case, Christian belief demand.<sup>38</sup>

For some global theologians, such as Raimundo Panikkar, who was perhaps the first to challenge the "common core" theory,<sup>39</sup> the many doctrinal varieties in pluralism (=my way is only one way of many with no common goal) are not to be papered over at the expense of postulating any objectified, abstracted or unified vision of the Real or Ultimate Truth à la John Hick.<sup>40</sup> The "many" continues to vie with the "one". Hans Küng, however, argues for a drive to universalist thinking, to a "transition from particularist to universal thinking, from a "theology of controversy" to an "ecumenical theology", "...a theology that sees in every other theology not an opponent but a partner, is bent on understanding instead of separation..."<sup>41</sup>

### **Dogmatism, Relativity, Perennial Philosophy and Shoghi Effendi's Kerygmatic Theology<sup>42</sup>**

Dogmatism is the much feared bogeyman of theology for postmoderns. Deconstructionism has set about dismantling what it views as all dogmatic, authoritarian, fixed or monolithic systems on the pretext of contextualising or relativising meaning. Some may wish to laud deconstructionism, then, for its overthrow of the totalitarian mega-system, be it theological or other, and the large place that has been left for the pluralized universe of the individual's microcosmic view of this or that corner of the cognitive world.

However, theology — Bahá'í or other — should have as one its preeminent goals the communal objectivisation of truth, even though truth largely transcends any logical strictures to which it is confined by human thought. Now truth, as Peter Berger has pointed out in commonsensical fashion, *resists relativization*.<sup>43</sup> Spiritual truth, following the view of those who hold to a *Sophia perennis et universalis* or to its other guise as primordial tradition,<sup>44</sup> is everywhere and always the same, even though it may appear in many a disguise. However, even if one granted that there are no absolute truths in the sense of contradiction-free statements, the truth is certainly absolute in the existential claim that it makes upon our lives.

When Shoghi Effendi refers to the relativity of religious truth in conjunction with progressive revelation as "the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief",<sup>45</sup> he is most likely *not* rejecting the notion of absolute truth, for `Abdu'l-Bahá has elsewhere said:

The spiritual aspect of religion is the greater [than the practical/formal], the more important of the two, and this is the same for all time, it never changes! It is the same, yesterday, today, and for ever! `As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.<sup>46</sup>

To address, at least in part, these timeless eternal truths in their momentary and situational garments, is the work of Bahá'í theology.

It is significant that Shoghi Effendi mentions the relativity of religious truth in conjunction with progressive revelation, for the key to his statement would seem to be that the relativity of religious truth becomes meaningful in the context of dispensational religion.<sup>47</sup> The Bahá'í view of dispensational religion would seem to be that religious truth is relative both to a given point in the historical evolution of successive revelations from God (world religions) and to the state of current understanding.

Shoghi Effendi's theology might be called kerygmatic or a theology of the Word, for his task is to take up and pass on the Word of Bahá'u'lláh, while more clearly defining its content. As *kerygma* (proclamation), Shoghi Effendi's theological writings resemble preaching or rhetorical theology, for he seeks as much to move, as he does to intellectually convince his readers, and his texts are characteristically exhortative, emphatic and triumphant.<sup>48</sup> That Shoghi Effendi's theology is in part rhetorical is no denigration. Scriptural scholar George A. Kennedy puts it that "all religious systems are rhetorical",<sup>49</sup> and to use Christianity as a reference point, there has been much rhetorical theology throughout its history. The rhetorical intent of Shoghi Effendi's theology is also understandable since *theologica rhetorica* is connected with proclamation and teaching.

Deconstruction, however, has led to a fragmentation of human discourse, in which consensual meaning (logocentrism) has been carelessly jettisoned. Deconstructionism's vision of language as nothing more than an endless chain in a "play of difference"<sup>50</sup> has called into question the viability of language itself, the very meaning of meaning. Ineluctably, deconstructionism must lead to a nihilistic deconstruction of itself. Its questionable attack on the meaning of language has had the effect of weakening the vitality of any belief system upon which religion to a great extent depends. Deconstructionism's incessant contextualisation of language would forgo or reduce that question so vital to religion — *what can we or do we believe?*

Many a sub-culture may answer in the affirmative that it shares common beliefs, but even within sub-cultures fragmentation proceeds unabated. Today especially, it is imperative that the world community begin to formulate some common global philosophy (pansophism/panlogism) and values, if for no other reason than as an imperative to survival. It should, moreover, be mentioned in this context that the global theologians are a rare lead-group of twentieth century intellectuals who are at least attempting to define some *common* core in world ethics, spiritual values, and world theology.<sup>51</sup> Here the theologians may well take a lead from the *literati*. As literature seeks to express itself in the language of the universal, and thus make itself more accessible, so should theology increasingly strive to speak the language of universal spiritual experience.

Although dogmatism may offend a postmodern view of theology, it would not be true to assert that Bahá'í theology is entirely non-dogmatic. The unconditional nature of the Word of God is uncompromising in its proclamation of the truth. Yet, Bahá'u'lláh, at the same as He is fearless in the salvific truths He proclaims, also exhorts his followers to an ethic of open-mindedness and sympathetic understanding in their dialogue with members of other religions.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Shoghi Effendi's commentaries on Bahá'í scripture such as *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* which is a classic theological treatise, is also uncompromising or dogmatic in its authoritative exposition of Bahá'í belief. In his role of Guardian and defender of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi's theological rhetoric was markedly dogmatic in the rejection of those theologies that did not concord with his authoritative interpretation of Bahá'í scripture.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the Universal House of Justice has affirmed that Shoghi Effendi's interpretations of Bahá'í scripture are quite authoritative: "The Guardian

reveals what the Scripture means; his interpretation is a statement of truth which cannot be varied."<sup>54</sup> However, following the pluralism of meaning implicit in the Word of God, other interpretations of the same text respecting the integrity of Shoghi Effendi's hermeneutic are valid.

However, Shoghi Effendi advocates a more "liberal theology"<sup>55</sup> in his advocacy of the hermeneutic of the "correlation" of the Bahá'í principles "to modern aspects of philosophy and science"<sup>56</sup> and in his recommendation "to correlate" the Bahá'í Faith with "all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today."<sup>57</sup> This openness to the spirit of modernity is coupled with Bahá'u'lláh's counsel "not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men", and to "rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of openmindedness and loving sympathy".<sup>58</sup> Despite the Bahá'í Faith's drawing of clear lines in its own doctrinal understanding of religious truth, its intellectual tolerance as attested to by Arnold Toynbee<sup>59</sup> and others leaves an open door for *rapprochement*.

### **The Debt of Bahá'í Theology to *ʿIlm-al-Kalám***

Shoghi Effendi has made strong recommendations that Bahá'ís:

...must strive to obtain, from sources that are authoritative and unbiased, a sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islám — the source and background of their Faith — and approach reverently and with a mind purged from preconceived ideas the study of the Qur'án...<sup>60</sup>

Yet in my view it would put a limitation on Bahá'í theology to reduce it entirely to the categories and terminology of its Islamic antecedents, as important as these are. Bahá'í theology must seek increasingly to become universal, that is, its scholars, wherever they reside, would do well to interpret the Bahá'í teachings in correlation with the teachings of the world's great religions.

Bahá'í scholars with backgrounds in Islamic-Bábí-Bahá'í studies have made valuable inroads into Bahá'í scholarship, inroads that have produced scholarly works of quality. Yet, it seems to me that more work has to be done, not only on the parallels between Islam and the Bábí-Bahá'í faiths, but also on how Bahá'í theology is *distinguished* from its Islamic antecedents. Stephen Lambden, for example, recognizes that "Typically Sufistic terminology and hermeneutics permeate certain of the writings of the Báb" and "Qur'anic exegesis in Bábí-Bahá'í scripture is quite frequently, in one way or another, Sufistic." Lambden, however, makes the important distinction that "The modern Bahá'í Faith, however, is not merely neo-Sufi. It is only peripherally and in certain doctrinal areas Sufistic."<sup>61</sup>

Shoghi Effendi's recommendation that Bahá'ís thoroughly familiarize themselves with the history and teachings of Islam as "the source and background of their Faith" should also be read jointly with the following statement of ʿAbdu'l-Bahá made during his lecture tour of North America in 1912. At Eighth Street Synagogue in Washington, D.C., in a talk during which he challenged the Jews in the assembly to accept Christ as "a Manifestation of the Word of God"<sup>62</sup>, ʿAbdu'l-Bahá said:

Praise be to God! You are living in a land of freedom. You are blessed with men of learning, men who are well versed in the comparative study of religions. You realize the need of unity and know the great harm which comes from prejudice and superstition. I ask you, is not fellowship and brotherhood preferable to enmity and hatred in society and community? The answer is self-evident.<sup>63</sup>

ʿAbdu'l-Bahá's statement suggests that not only is comparative religion — now referred to



increasingly as global theology — an instrument for learning and the alleviation of the blight of religious superstition and prejudice, but also infers that it is a vehicle for furthering societal harmony through interfaith association and dialogue.

### **The Knowledge of the Spiritual Self as a Convergence of Theology and Spirituality**

Postmodernism has attempted to void the notion of self as nothing more than a social construct.<sup>64</sup> Yet in Bahá'í theology the self is a basic category that is the common property of both philosophical theology and mysticism. According to Juan Ricardo Cole whose paper "Bahá'u'lláh and Liberation Theology" appears in this volume, the "Self of God" (*nafs illahí*) would seem "to refer to the totality of God's active attributes, of which the prophets and messengers are manifestations."<sup>65</sup> The individual, divine self mirrors the Self of God through all of the names and attributes of God (*Ar. Asmá wa Sifát Alláh*).<sup>66</sup> On the individual level, Shoghi Effendi makes a binary distinction in the understanding of the self: one, the divine self, the identity of the individual created by God, the other, the ego "...the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on."<sup>67</sup>

In Bahá'í mysticism, the ideal self is found in the first valley of *The Four Valleys (Cháhár Vadí)* as the beloved self: "On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned."<sup>68</sup> Bahá'u'lláh's location of the origin of the human self in the Self of God are echoed in Peter Berger's telling statement: "In other words, there can be no self without God".<sup>69</sup> In Bahá'í perspective he who would void self voids God. Such a vital metaphysical reality as the self as soul cannot be so easily annihilated.

By "the knowledge of spiritual self" I refer to the individual's understanding of the Divine Word and the concrete experiences of living-in-the-world as progenitors of understanding. The knowledge of spiritual self will illumine the understanding of spiritual *anthros*, and inspire or enrich the life of the believer. Otherwise, theology will remain restricted to that knowledge which `Abdu'l-Bahá's describes as being confined to the realm of "Thought that belongs to the world of thought alone."<sup>70</sup> The knowledge of the spiritual self refers, then, to an understanding of self and others as living and acting divine beings. In this perspective, spiritual experience and spiritual knowledge are perceived as existing together as one thing, in a symbiotic relationship in which theory and practice function as one manifold. For Bahá'u'lláh emphatically declares that the discovery of the knowledge of self as the knowledge of God will lead to the acquisition of vast wisdom and knowledge.

I swear by God, O esteemed and honoured friend! Shouldst thou ponder these words in thine heart [‘He hath known God who hath known himself.’], thou wilt of a certainty find the doors of divine wisdom and infinite knowledge flung open before thy face.<sup>71</sup>

The knowledge of the spiritual self (self-knowledge) would here be perceived as the highest form of knowledge worth possessing, for it is a more perfect knowledge that constitutes both end and means.

The spiritual anthropology of the believer distinguishes the spiritual person as the preeminent creation of God. The knowledge of the spiritual self involves, moreover, what `Abdu'l-Bahá has called "the discovery of the verities of life"<sup>72</sup> and *ilm-i vújúdí* (the knowledge of being/existence),<sup>73</sup> critical areas that have been thus far conspicuously lacking in Bahá'í theology. Further, such an approach to Bahá'í theology alludes to the growth of the soul in its continual evolution toward the ultimate and final goal of spiritual life, union with God which is the *proprium* of mysticism. The main purpose of religion, as the Bahá'í writings repeatedly affirm, is spiritual

transformation<sup>74</sup> which is but another word for enhanced self-knowledge.

It is underscored that this knowledge of the spiritual self is not merely theoretical, however, but derives from and leads to *praxis* (practical ethics). It is *savoir-faire* or "know-how" and should be distinguished from knowledge as an end in itself. Self-knowledge as *praxis* or know-how is an empirical form of spiritual science that is distinguished from speculation or analysis. Such knowledge includes both principle and practice. In this context, the renowned literary critic, Northrop Frye, has referred to a useful distinction created by Plato. Plato distinguished *nous* from *dianoia*. *Nous*<sup>75</sup> is knowledge *of* things, as distinguished from *dianoia*, knowledge *about* things. The knowledge *of* things, Frye says, "implies some identification or essential unity of subject and object", whereas *dianoia* implies a dichotomy of subject and object.<sup>76</sup> *Nous* would refer, then, to participatory knowledge and *dianoia* to detached knowing. The knowledge of the self relates to *nous*, that is a direct, intuitive form of knowledge with which the knowing subject is intimately connected, a knowledge which leads to *praxis*, or some deeper insight or wisdom.

Similarly, Simone Weil in *Leçons de philosophie (Lectures on Philosophy)*<sup>77</sup> writes regarding the injunction of the Delphic maxim 'Know thyself' (*gnothi sauton*)<sup>78</sup> written over Apollo's shrine that by it Socrates meant self-knowledge, in contradistinction to knowledge about external things, as "the ultimate end of all thought."<sup>79</sup> Weil comments further on the famous dictum: "It seems to have meant: 'Why do you have to come and ask me about the secrets of nature, of the future? All you need to do is know yourself'.<sup>80</sup> She states further about self knowledge: "The knowledge of external things has no real interest, or, at least, is of less interest for men in general than self-knowledge. And, what is more, self-knowledge is the only thing that gives any value to any thought and action you care to think about."<sup>81</sup>

While this comment is merely stipulative, Weil writes that the meaning of self-knowing is ambiguous. She understands three ordinary meanings to self-knowing: (1) knowing oneself in order to change, to correct oneself [transformation]. This would be self-knowledge as a means while Socrates viewed self-knowledge as an end (2) knowing oneself in order to find out what one is capable of doing, to make good use of oneself [the release of potential]. (3) Following Montaigne, knowing oneself in order to come to know human nature.[self-understanding to understand others].<sup>82</sup> By a process of shorthand dialectic, however, Weil concludes that the "self is a term which has no meaning",<sup>83</sup> yet she comes to the ethical insight at the conclusion of her lecture that "In all circumstances, to be a man, is to know how to separate the 'I' and 'self'. This is a task which never ends."<sup>84</sup> Weil here seems to be making a similar distinction found in the Bahá'í sacred writings between the "higher" and "lower" self.<sup>85</sup> Weil's 'I' would represent the ego, elemental or selfish desires and the 'self', the magnanimity or self-sacrifice of the spiritual individual.

Some modern-day theologians have also come to the realisation that theology cannot be integral without spirituality (the knowledge of self). After centuries of having staked out their territory from the more "pastoral" concerns of spirituality, certain scholars of religion maintain that the partition between the two domains is no longer tenable. From the same academies of religion that have been devoted to Max Müller's advocacy of *Religionswissenschaft*<sup>86</sup> dating back to 1867, new voices are now being heard that have seriously begun to question this sundering of personal spiritual beliefs from the objective question. This recent trend toward an integration of the spirituality of the believer with the performative aspects of the intellect, although it has more ancient roots in medieval Christianity and Islam,<sup>87</sup> is fully consonant with the Bahá'í Faith.

David Tracy, one of North America's preeminent theologians, has outlined some of the benefits to the performative aspects of theology in its recovery of spirituality. In a conversation with

Todd Breyfogle and Thomas Levergood, Tracy declares the present necessity of a much-needed collaboration:

I think that theology will be better off the more theologians attempt to recover a relationship to traditions of spirituality and thus undo the separation of theology and spirituality that developed after medieval scholasticism, which made a distinction between the two without separating them.<sup>88</sup>

For David Tracy "...an absolutely crucial part of the undoing of that separation would be, in theology, spiritual attentiveness to the presence of God in all of life, including [and perhaps especially] theology".<sup>89</sup> Further, the "crucial part", for Tracy, of a synthesis of the spiritual and theological dimensions would be a recovery of both the mystical and prophetic traditions.<sup>90</sup> [Diana Eck]

Bahá'í scholars of religion, particularly, could render a great service to the discipline of theology were they to begin to restore the consciousness and practice of spirituality to the study of theology.<sup>91</sup> Purely theoretical approaches to the study of religion would appear to fall into the trap of `Abdu'l-Bahá's pointed critique of religion as "the noise, the clamor, the hollowness of religious doctrine."<sup>92</sup> Marcus Bach reports a comment of Shoghi Effendi that is relevant to this point: "Men have been so absorbed in the study of theology that they have neglected the study of life."<sup>93</sup>

The three-pronged exegetical, apologetical and philosophical theological approaches that have thus far defined Bahá'í theology, by the predominance of a detached objectivism, have created a benign neglect of other capital questions such as practical ethics or spirituality which `Abdu'l-Bahá has defined as "the fundamental aspect of the religion of God".<sup>94</sup> Such "objective" approaches have tended to divorce Bahá'í theology from the existential experience of the individual believer. The detached-objective mode of Bahá'í theology has also resulted in a certain monotony of discourse for a religion that increasingly demands a pluralism of meaning.

### **The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition**

David Tracy's advocacy of the recovery of the prophetic tradition is, of course, deeply meaningful for Bahá'ís. The Bahá'í Faith since its inception in 1844 has not only advocated the recovery of prophetic teaching as the treasury of the world's wisdom, but remains fully immersed in it through the voluminous writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá. While the Bahá'í Faith claims to be a new, distinct and universal revelation, its message is also a restatement and a reaffirmation of the prophetic messages gone before. It comes then, Bahá'ís believe, as the fulfilment of a long line of prophetic dispensations in the classical sense of the word,<sup>95</sup> but sees itself inextricably bound with the revelations that have gone before it.

The enormous influence of the prophets or Manifestations of God within history is ubiquitous and still largely unsuspected. The literature on prophethood is vast, and there is no space here for appreciating the distinctions and variations in the various cultural forms of prophetic office throughout history, both in Europe and the Middle East, such as the ecstatic cultic *Pythia* (priestess) and associate prophet of Apollo's oracle-shrine at Delphi, the prophetic brotherhoods in ancient Israel, or even for comparing the significant differences in the missions and teachings of the earlier *Ro'éh* (seers, visionaries) and later prophets (*Nebi'im*, sing. *Nábi*) among the company of divine messengers of Israel and Judah. However, I move now *inter alia*<sup>96</sup> to three brief considerations of prophetic teaching: (i) prophetic apophysis as one of the foundation stones for the unity of the world's great religions (ii) the unity of the prophets (iii) the prophets as role models of spirituality.

The first point concerns the very strong potential that the prophetic *via negativa* of the divine apophysis holds for laying down one of the common foundational beliefs of the world's great religions. Stephen N. Lambden has well covered the ground with his paper "The Background and Centrality of Apophatic Theology in Bábí and Bahá'í Scripture" (pp. 00-00) which engages the reader in a comparative study of the point with Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The apophysis of the divine teachers, their reverent silence for the Divine Ipseity, the unknown, inaccessible essence of God-*Háhút* as taught in Sufi speculative mystical theology, is a teaching which in various guises shares common ground in the Abrahamic Faiths. But it also has implications worth exploring in the religions of Asia. Hinduism's *Nirguna Brahman*, God without attributes, as taught by mystic philosopher Sankarā (Sankaracharya) (circa 788-820 CE), has clear apophatic dimensions as contrasted with *Saguna Brahman*,<sup>97</sup> God with attributes, and the *Nirguna Brahman* of the Katha Upanishad (6:7,8) is precisely the apophatic God. As to the nontheistic nature of Buddhism, comparative religionist Raimundo Panikkar in *The Silence of God. The Answer of the Buddha* (1989), maintains that the Buddha cannot qualify either as an agnostic or an atheist (9-10). Panikkar writes: "God remains obscure, unknown, incomprehensible, mysterious. On his salvation journey, Shákyamuni prescinds [leaves out of consideration] from God....The Buddha is silent of God."<sup>98</sup> Such a statement has apophatic implications.

The second point concerns the collegiality of the prophets. Bahá'u'lláh asks us to see the prophets with the "eye of oneness",<sup>99</sup> and be sensitive to their correlative and complementary functions. Despite the liberalism observed by the dialogue theologians and the academic community of religionists generally, the adherents of the world's faiths have not yet totally divested themselves of that mind-set of "religious nationalism", in Joachim Wach's phrase, which betrays us into believing, however subtly, that the founder of one great religion is superior in some particular way to another. And certainly the Bahá'í Faith makes the clear distinction, as does the Quran ("Even as He hath revealed "Some of the Apostles We have caused to excel the others.")<sup>100</sup>, that the intensity of the light is greater in some of the prophets than in others. But it is interesting — and it is as if to *downplay* this greater intensity that shines more in the globe of some divine lamps than in others — that Bahá'u'lláh says: "They *only* differ in the intensity of their revelation, and the comparative potency of their light"<sup>101</sup> [emphasis mine]. Bahá'u'lláh, it appears, is drawing our attention not so much to the degree of intensity in the divine luminosity of the individual prophet, but rather to the genesis of the diaphanous light itself.

Put more literally, Bahá'u'lláh has excluded the notion of moral, salvific, psychological or metaphysical superiority from the discussion of one religion and another, a mode we are liable to slip into when we compare, since the natural human tendency is to make value judgements and appraisals when faced with differences. Such fine distinctions may be appropriate in our mundane choice of gourmet coffee or automobiles, but the only heavenly distinction that Bahá'u'lláh requires us to make is the one that says *all* the Divine Manifestations are excellent in their moral authority, their psychological wisdom, the purity of their lives and their saving grace: "Every one of Them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of His Truth unto every one in the kingdoms of earth and heaven."<sup>102</sup>

And while comparative religion has served its students well in counteracting religious nationalism, in accentuating the diversity that makes for the richness and beauty of the multi-motifed tapestry of the great world's religions, and in bringing to light the distinctive features of each one, in respect to any purported or potential superiority of one prophet over another "all comparisons are odious". For they, Bahá'u'lláh teaches, are to be considered as one soul, and so, he tells us, they considered themselves: "For they are all but one person, one soul, one spirit, one

being, one revelation."<sup>103</sup> Bahá'u'lláh's imperative of prophetic unity goes even further. It is categorical and absolute, and he ties into the very fabric of belief in God:

Whoso maketh the slightest possible difference between their persons, their words, their messages, their acts and manners, hath indeed disbelieved in God, hath repudiated His signs, and betrayed the Cause of His Messengers.<sup>104</sup>

Thus in the Bahá'í view, the messengers are one and their cause is one. That the prophets of God did not, prior to the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, emphasize their intrinsic metaphysical unity only indicates the divine wisdom in foreseeing humanity's former incapacity to appreciate the prophetic oneness, given geographical impediments, cultural isolation and the provincialisms imposed by space-time.

But it should also be noted that the silence of the prophets on this point was not complete, and they certainly did allude to it in certain of their sayings. Moses says, for example, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren — him you shall heed — ..." "And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him" (Deuteronomy 18: 15, 18).<sup>105</sup> In what appears to be a remarkable fulfilment of that prophecy, Jesus said: "Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (John 5:45-47). Bahá'u'lláh likewise tells us: "Thus hath Muhammad, the Point of the Qur'an, revealed: "I am all the Prophets." Likewise, He saith: "I am the first Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus." Similar statements have been made by Imam 'Ali".<sup>106</sup> Further, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that within the Abrahamic religions each of the prophets covenanted as to the coming of the Divine Manifestation who succeeded him.<sup>107</sup>

Now that the door of the Adamic cycle has been closed in the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, "the Seal of the Prophets" (*khátam al-nabíyyín*),<sup>108</sup> and the door to a new and greater cycle been flung wide open, a cycle already characterised by the first stirrings of the unity of the human race, as perceived by Arnold J. Toynbee, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and many others, it is now both timely and expedient to expand on Bahá'u'lláh's teaching of the "essential unity" of the prophets as one of the greatest aids in the pacification and reconstruction of a united human race. Cantwell Smith has written of our epoch-making century as a harbinger for world unity:

Future historians, it has been said, will look back upon the twentieth century not primarily for its scientific achievements but as the century of the coming-together of peoples, when all mankind became for the first time became one community.<sup>109</sup>

For to use a poetic analogy, when mountain-climbing, one has to reach a certain altitude (vertically), just as the human race has reached a culminating point in the time-line of its collective history (horizontally), before one can pause to survey the vista below and be truly awed by the scene. Such is the broad pattern now visible to those who contemplate the history of the prophets.

While he does not attempt to level out the particularity of the message of each Divine Manifestation to an indiscrete, bland sameness, to "some sort of something or other", Bahá'u'lláh draws our attention especially to this station of "pure abstraction" and "essential unity" of the divine messengers:

If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the

same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith. Such is the unity of those Essences of Being, those Luminaries of infinite and immeasurable splendor!<sup>110</sup>

Based on a historic interview with Shoghi Effendi, comparative religionist Marcus Bach relates in simple but telling words the thoughts of the former head of the Bahá'í Faith on the being and mission of the prophets as "The greatest forces in the world..."<sup>111</sup>

Through them God makes Himself known and carries civilization forward. They are His messengers. They live, and it is God living among men. They speak, and it is God's word. They suffer, and it is God bearing the pain and the sin of the world. They take upon themselves disdain and persecution, and it is God bowing His head and baring His shoulders to the whips and scourges of His children. They die, and it is God who weeps. They ascend, and it is God in His glory who again shows man His true estate.<sup>112</sup>

The third point concerns the prophets as credible role models of spirituality. In their acquiescence to the Divine Will throughout their sorrow-laden lives and in the execution of their missions, the prophets have manifested a singular, exemplary faithfulness and detachment. In responding readily to the call of God as depicted in the various "call narratives"<sup>113</sup>, and in their fierce devotion to the Truth He mandated them to reveal, the divine Manifestations proved themselves to be the most ready instruments for the proclamation of the divine purpose. When they felt it was justified, the God-borne audacity that surged out from their prophetic charisma ("gift of grace"),<sup>114</sup> drove them to be anti-syncretistic, anti-cultic, and on occasion even anti-monarchical. Our very sense of judgement has been born out of their discriminatory moral sense, and the judgements they pronounced on nations, kings and priests.

Bahá'u'lláh writes that the very revolutionary changes brought about by these anti-institutional non-conformists in the proclamation of new laws and the reformation of former religious teachings was the very cause of rejection by their contemporaries:

Consider how men for generations have been blindly imitating their fathers, and have been trained according to such ways and manners as have been laid down by the dictates of their Faith. Were these men, therefore, to discover suddenly that a Man, Who hath been living in their midst, Who, with respect to every human limitation, hath been their equal, had risen to abolish every established principle imposed by their Faith — principles by which for centuries they have been disciplined, and every opposer and denier of which they have come to regard as infidel, profligate and wicked, — they would of a certainty be veiled and hindered from acknowledging His truth.<sup>115</sup>

The worth of these exceptional individuals, moreover, has been made plain for all who care to examine their lives. William Elmslie writes:

Knowledge of Hebrew Prophecy is knowledge of the lives of glorious personalities; only when name after name of the prophets calls up the memory of lonely insight into truth, of unbreakable loyalty to duty, maintained through scorn and hatred and despite despair, can its splendour be realised.<sup>116</sup>

It is very largely through the steadfastness of the Prophets in the face of the incredible adversity that has always been mounted against them that human personality has become defined in its most noble aspects. Their lives have given credence to the meaning of authenticity. For the prophets, unlike most armchair philosophers, are themselves the first exemplars of their profoundly ethical teachings. Although their writings reflect a clear awareness of the depths of metaphysical

truth, they are no mere *speculants*. Before all others, the prophets discovered the secret to the equation that faith is life, and life is faith. For them life is intrinsically sacred and hallowed with divine meaning. They are willing, moreover, to pay the supreme sacrifice for the sake of credibility. For they know, that lest their blood be spilled, lest their way be agony, they will not be believed. Belief, for them, is wrought not by discursive reason but by example.

Bahá'u'lláh asks us to "Examine the wondrous behaviour of the Prophets..."<sup>117</sup> and he affirms that a careful examination of their lives and the reasons for the opposition they faced will lead to an increase of faith:

Should you acquaint yourself with the indignities heaped upon the Prophets of God, and apprehend the true causes of the objections voiced by their oppressors, you will surely appreciate the significance of their position. Moreover, the more closely you observe the denials of those who have opposed the Manifestations of the divine attributes, the firmer will be your faith in the Cause of God.<sup>118</sup>

The prophets were, moreover, profoundly action-oriented. Their lives both answer and transcend the criterium which Goethe set for himself in a letter to Friedrich Schiller stating his preference for the reciprocity of learning and activity: "Moreover I hate everything which merely instructs me without increasing or directly quickening my activity."<sup>119</sup> As untutored teachers, the prophets dispensed learning by the sheer force and cogency of their meaning, the beauty of their words, the integrity of their lives. Through them "the individual's aspiration towards God" (prayer and longing) and the sense of "individual responsibility" (promise and covenant) and "the instincts of personal piety" (spirituality)<sup>120</sup> became well-established in the history of religion. Without them, the words "the knowledge of God" would never have been written.

### **The Bahá'í Faith and the Truth Claim**

The advent of the revelations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in the last century has brought to the fore in compelling fashion once again the issue of the truth-claim. The phenomenon of the truth-claim is one of those patterns that runs through the comparative study of religion, for all the major prophets of God claimed to be, not only revelators of divine truth, but more significantly the truth itself. Any claim on the prophet's part to reveal divine truth and/or to be the living embodiment of truth should strike us as a dramatically singular claim, worthy of the most serious attention.

Curiously, however, the modern academic study of religion has to a large extent jettisoned any preoccupation with the truth-claim. In this context, Huston Smith questions the sorry neglect of the paramount question of the investigation of the truth itself. In "Postmodernism's Impact on the Study of Religion", a paper that critiques modernity's consequences for the study and teaching of religion, Smith writes:

So we pour our departmental energies into features of religion that have objective, empirical grounding — philology, archaeology, historical influences and textual parallels — and bracket the question of whether the beliefs that generated those fallouts were mistaken or true.<sup>121</sup>

Precisely. It would appear, however, that the fear of offending another's religious beliefs lies behind this neglect, and has created, at least in the polite world of academic protocol, a virtual no man's land where few dare to address the issue of the seeming incompatibility of the key doctrines of the world's great religions. And yet, according to `Abdu'l-Bahá's dictum, if "the shining spark of

truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions",<sup>122</sup> scholars must find a way of expressing their views when they have honest differences with particular components of other religious systems, without expressing the hostile extremism that is so characteristic of fundamentalism. The detached objectivism that merely portrays the characteristics of this system or that, only describes some theological construct or other from a distance, and does not dare to evaluate, would seem to be lacking in one of the most requisite characteristics of the scholar — critical judgement. Lack of commitment to one's own fully integrated understanding of the truth, in the long run, rather does a disservice to the power of truth in its acquisition of faith and certitude. This reluctance to engage in challenging debate and dialogue has resulted in a consequent dilution in the powers of human thought and levelled out the belief systems to the lowest common denominator.

John Hick is one of the few notable scholars of religion today to have asserted that the critical evaluation of truth-claims cannot be set aside, even at the risk of sparking contention. During an address given to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the World's Parliament of Religions at the Church of Scotland Assembly Hall in Edinburgh on 2 October 1993 Hick said:

For many involved in dialogue, this practical focus means leaving on one side the thorny question of the conflicting truth-claims of our different traditions. Many hold that we are still not ready to tackle those questions, and should not risk contention by bringing them forward. My own view is that genuine questions of belief cannot be avoided and that we must prepare ourselves to face them — not instead of matters of practical cooperation but, for some of us at least, as well as these.<sup>123</sup>

Hick's challenge not only causes us to confront the issue, but he also suggests a bipolar outcome. The first is exclusionary. The second is conciliatory. The first is the either/or clause, the logic that says A cannot be B, that truth cannot admit of error:

One is the conclusion that our respective doctrines are simply contradictory and irreconcilable, and that this sets a final limit to the developing relations between the different religious traditions.<sup>124</sup>

Hick's conciliatory option is based on three analogies. The first lies in the duck-rabbit picture-perspective of Wittgenstein. Hick argues through the Wittgenstein's analogy that because of cultural antecedents the ones who see a duck, and the others who see a rabbit, are both right. But one is not right to maintain that the other is either confused or mistaken. For the others' perception of either duck or rabbit is as valid as ours. The second analogy is based on Niels Bohr's wave-particle complement in the physics of the 1950's. Seemingly divergent, even irreconcilable views of the Absolute and God and practices of prayer and meditation in Hinduism, Zen and Christianity can be simultaneously embraced because the practitioners cause the light of the Real to behave metaphorically in some situations as interference effects (waves), and in others as photoelectric reactions (particles). Both reactions are true and real relative to the observer's perception of the light. The third analogy is from cartography, an analogy also used by Huston Smith in an article on science and religion.<sup>125</sup> Hick compares the theologies of the world's great religions to the gnomonic, stereographic, and orthographic types of projections used by cartographers. Any mode of projection inevitably distorts a map, but it does not follow that one mode is accurate and the others are inaccurate. All are accurate, but all, to some extent, distort.<sup>126</sup>

In their own estimates of the veracity of certain key doctrines of the world faiths, the founders of the Bahá'í Faith oscillate between the exclusionary and the conciliatory modes. While



the exclusionary mode certainly dominates, for example, in the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh's prophethood, i.e., the Bahá'í writings exclude the possibility of Bahá'u'lláh's being anything but a divine Manifestation of God, and while there are also clear rejections of pantheism and incarnation theology, other passages allow for more open door interpretations of these same doctrines. For one thing, the computer that is processing this text, even by the most generous stretch of the imagination, cannot be God (pantheism). However, idealist philosopher Karl C.F. Krause's (1781-1832)<sup>127</sup> modified version of pantheism, *panentheism* (God is in all things but all things are not God), put to further use in Whitehead's and Hartshorne's Process Theology, parallels the Bahá'í teaching of the indwelling names and attributes of God. [Arabic] By this reckoning, even the computer might reflect one of the divine names — the genius of the human being. Yet even acknowledging a greater comfort with panentheism, I am still confronted by a mystery: what is the name or names of the attributes of God which dwell in matter? Even more confounding, what is the essence of matter itself that humans have remodelled over the ages in the endless variety of their artifacts? Bahá'í theology thus leaves a large place for mystery and wonder which Einstein tells us lies at the root of science.<sup>128</sup> Further, God may be personal, but He is not in essence a Person. So incarnation theology in the Bahá'í view is doubly erroneous, not only for its reduction of the infinite, changeless, and eternal Godhead to the temporal structure of the human frame (Christ's, Krishna's or other), but it is also anthropomorphic in that it makes God a person. Yet God cannot belong to the genus "person", since He is by definition unique and incomparable, however person is defined,<sup>129</sup> and lies beyond the created orders of being or thought. Bahá'í theology speaks, however, of "the complete incarnation of the *names and attributes* of God"<sup>130</sup> in the person of the Divine Manifestation. The essence of Divinity remains, however, in Otto's phrase *das ganz Andere*, the wholly other.<sup>131</sup>

These two brief examples of pantheism/panentheism and incarnation of essence/incarnation of names also point to the conciliatory mode of Bahá'í theology. While the literal interpretation of both pantheism and incarnation theology are rejected by the Bahá'í Faith, it has nonetheless its own understanding of such doctrines. While reinterpretations of another's religious doctrines is usually viewed as being invalid hermeneutics, we have to remember that adaptations and variations of another's doctrinal concepts or religious practices have passed from one religion to another for centuries.

The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*<sup>132</sup> has traced, for example, the Hellenistic influences of the mystery religions and gnostic groups on such Christian doctrines as blood sacrifice and atonement, resurrection and the sacraments.<sup>133</sup> In the perspective of the history of religions school, the Christian doctrines were themselves reformulations of the Greek mysteries and other Oriental religions of salvation. So one may argue that from this perspective there is no religious doctrine which is not a reinterpretation or reformulation of a prior belief. All beliefs derive from or are set against a particular theological background, and are then defined, in the light of the prior beliefs, as being correct or incorrect. The Bahá'í Faith has employed such reformulations,<sup>134</sup> and has defined any of its new doctrines by virtue of the authority of the divine revelation of its scriptures, but has preserved any notions of truth that it has defined as part of its legacy from the religion(s) that have preceded it.

The Universal House of Justice has, moreover, written something quite pertinent to this discussion. While the Universal House of Justice points to certain positive effects, it has also alluded to the resultant double negative that has followed in the wake of "the liberalization of religious thought" since roughly 1850. The House of Justice writes:

One is antagonism to any statement which could be held to imply even an oblique criticism of another person's religion. The other, which is indirectly related to the first, is a progressive dilution of the content of religious belief to a lowest common denominator of uncontentious statement.<sup>135</sup>

In a cogent twist of logic, The Universal House of Justice links the gingerly world of polite interfaith dialogue to the paradoxically opposite extreme of the rise of religious fundamentalism:

It is not surprising that in reaction to such an atmosphere, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of those, particularly among the youth who, thirsty for truth, discipline and challenge in religion, gravitate to the opposite extreme of fundamentalism.<sup>136</sup>

The prophets of God, it is worth remembering, came onto the world scene as iconoclasts in their proclamation of divine truth. During a talk at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Edward B. Kinney in New York on 29 May 1912, `Abdu'l-Bahá said: "The divine Manifestations have been iconoclastic in Their teachings, uprooting error, destroying false religious beliefs and summoning mankind anew to the fundamental oneness of God."<sup>137</sup> Scholars are neither prophets nor the rare recipients of divine revelation, but their devotion to truth, and their defence of it, should reflect, in however diminished fashion, the same consecration that fired the spirit of the Manifestations of God.

All of this to say that the question of the truth-claim has once again come full front and centre in the advent of Bahá'u'lláh. For those who may regard themselves as devoted seekers of truth, they can in no wise ignore the claims of the Persian Prophet whose repeated and emphatic proclamation was that he was the most Mighty Instrument in our age for the establishment of planetary unity through the aegis of a new world faith.

Shoghi Effendi sets the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's weighty claim against the fragility and precariousness of the human condition today in the following dramatic and moving statement:

Who, contemplating the helplessness, the fears and miseries of humanity in this day, can any longer question the necessity for a fresh revelation of the quickening power of God's redemptive love and guidance? Who, witnessing on one hand the stupendous advance achieved in the realm of human knowledge, of power, of skill and inventiveness, and viewing on the other the unprecedented character of the sufferings that afflict, and the dangers that beset, present-day society, can be so blind as to doubt that the hour has at last struck for the advent of a new Revelation, for a re-statement of the Divine Purpose, and for the consequent revival of those spiritual forces that have, at fixed intervals, rehabilitated the fortunes of human society?<sup>138</sup>

## Conclusion

Bahá'í theology in its current state of development is characterised by the functional tendencies of exegesis, apologetics and philosophical theology. Although the postmodern and deconstructionist temper of the times is decidedly anti-authoritarian, Bahá'í theology, particularly in the writings of Shoghi Effendi, reveals alternately both dogmatic and liberal tendencies. The systematic Bahá'í theologian has not yet emerged. However, any Bahá'í systematic theology must welcome a pluralism of thought, and avoid a detached over-objectivisation of the truth by addressing the existential concerns of the self in a process of spiritual transformation while living-in-the-world. While recognizing its debt to *`Ilm-i-Kalám*, Bahá'í theology should increasingly seek

to become universal. The recovery of the unsuspected but ubiquitous influence of the prophets merits on-going attention as one of the fundamental preoccupations of Bahá'í theology. The weighty claims advanced by the founders of the Bahá'í Faith have brought again to the fore in compelling fashion the issue of the truth claim.

## Notes

---

1. Shoghi Effendi wrote: "As to your question as to what constitutes indirect teaching; it essentially consists in presenting some of the humanitarian or social teachings of the Cause which are shared by those whom we are teaching, as a means of attracting them to those aspects of the Faith which are more challenging in character, and are specifically and solely Bahá'í...." (28 May, 1937 published in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 598)
2. By this I mean `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. As regards the function of interpretation of the Universal House of Justice, the practice to some extent differs from the theory. Strictly speaking legislation, not interpretation is the province of the Universal House of Justice, but the House of Justice retains nonetheless a limited interpretive function, as it has itself affirmed: "Although not invested with the function of interpretation, the House of Justice is in a position to do everything necessary to establish the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh on this earth" (*Wellspring of Guidance*, p. 52-53). In actual practice, the interpretive function of the Universal House of Justice is at work constantly whenever it mandates its plans and directives based on its unerring understanding of Bahá'í Holy Writ and whenever it elucidates questions or settles issues which have become a cause of confusion to individuals or the community.
3. The distinction between *source theology* and *derivative theology* is from my article "Prolegomena to a Bahá'í Theology", *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 5, no. 1, 1992, pp. 35-36. A more in-depth consideration of the definition of Bahá'í theology in the light of theology and comparative religion is made in "Defining Bahá'í Theology", pp. 28-36 and in "Bahá'í Theology" (*ibid*) pp. 49-53.
4. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pp. 42-43.
6. "Lawh-i-Hikmat" in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 140.
7. Bultmann
8. Several theologians and postcritical interpreters of scripture such as Hans Frei, Moshe Greenberg and Michael Fishbane have been advocating a return (*teshuvah*) to the biblical texts from a one-sided and overstated historical-critical method. The return to scripture would be characterised by a pre-critical "realistic narrative" approach (Frei), and a dehistoricised, more personal and holistic experience between reader and text (Greenberg) and by an unveiling of the "outer garments" of Torah to enter into "a living dialogue with one's whole being" (Fishbane). The reader-oriented approach is also typical of Paul Ricoeur's approach in which the reader's own mental world gives meaning to the text. From Peter Ochs's instructive article "Returning to Scripture: Trends in Postcritical Interpretation" in the thematic issue of *Cross Currents*, "Returning to Scripture", Vol. 44, No. 4, Winter 1994/95, pp. 437-452.
9. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 168, p. 81. The Notes of *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* explain that "These words contain an allusion to a statement of the Báb in the Persian Bayán about the "Living Book", which He identifies as Him Whom God will make manifest... He cautions the "followers of every other Faith" against seeking "reasons in their Holy Books" for refuting the utterances of the "Living Book". He admonishes the people not to allow what has been recorded in the "Book" to prevent them from recognising His Station and from holding fast to what is in this new Revelation." (N. 155, p. 231)
10. "In fact, the gap between exegesis and systematic theology is the misery afflicting present-day dogmatics." [systematics] *Theology for the Third Millennium, An Ecumenical View*, trans. Peter Heinegg, (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 194.
11. David J. Krieger in *The New Universalism. Foundations for a Global Theology* writes: "I will show first how pluralism resulted from an *internal split*, a break in the continuity of Western cultural identity. This entails

---

showing how Christian theology arose from apologetic impulse..." (p. 17)

12. Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: a study in the logic of interreligious dialogue*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991. p. xii. Quoted in Seena Fazel, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations", in the present volume, p. 00.
13. David J. Krieger, *The New Universalism. Foundations for a Global Theology*, pp. 17-18.
14. John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 2. I have mainly followed Hick's understanding in order to distinguish Bahá'í philosophical theology from the philosophy of religion, but have diverged from his use of philosophy of religion when he excludes a philosophy of life or existence from the term.
15. John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 1.
16. L. Gardet makes the point in "Ilm-i-Kalam" in *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* that from the time of al-Djuwayni onwards syllogistic or three mode reasoning began to replace the old two term mode. At this time the philosophers became the usual opponents of the *Mutakallimún* as well as the Mu`tazilis and the *falásifa* were refuted on their own ground using Aristotelian logic with Stoic influences (p. 1146). Modern day *Kalám* which subsists entirely in the old fossilized manuals seems to have come to a dead-end and stands in need of a "modern and living renewal", one that would take "account of the demands of scientific discoveries and present-day thinking", a renewal that would not ignore "the burning problems of today". (p. 1149)
17. This distinction is one of the points made near the end of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Kant held that since the very forms of perception and thought are intrinsic to the knower, that is, enformed in his/her perceptual/structural make-up, the knowledge of "the thing in itself" (*Das Ding an sich*) was necessarily limited to its appearance which was perceived as a function of the knower's experience and categories of interpretation.
18. I allude here to just some of the philosophical issues raised in Bahá'í scripture: the origin of the universe, nature, spiritual reality, the nature of God's names and attributes, arguments for the existence of God, pre-existence, the nature of evil, epistemology, free will, fate and predestination, the question of the one and the many (unity and particularity). There is also a wealth of questions related more specifically to Islamic theology.
19. The theory that either something can be true in philosophy according to reason and its opposite true in theology according to faith, or that philosophy and theology can express seemingly contradictory truths at different levels. In its various forms, "Double truth" was first expressed by Al Farabi, followed by Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. With these three philosophers, however, philosophy had the final say over the fundamentalist *mutakallimún*.
20. The prime example of the Latin Averroists is the philosopher Siger de Brabant (circa 1235-1282 CE) who wrote about a dozen volumes on Aristotelian themes. Frederick Copleston writes that what certain of Siger de Brabant's final opinions were cannot be determined until the chronology of his works has been settled. Unclear is whether or not Siger completely retracted his heterodox opinions of monopsychism and the eternity of the world. (See "Latin Averroism: Siger of Brabant" in *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Part 2, Mediaeval Philosophy, pp. 156-163.
21. See, for example, the arguments against Ibn Rush and Ibn Sina in *passim* in the three articles of Aquinas's Question XLVI, "On the Beginning of the Duration of Creatures" in the *Summa*. Aquinas rejected the arguments of the Aristotelian Islamic philosophers for the eternity of the created world and their arguments for pre-existence.
22. *Commentary of Four Books of Sentences (Scriptum in IV Libros Sententiarum)*, Prologue, q.1, a. in *An Aquinas Reader*, pp. 411-412. The *Sententiae* was a work of the medieval theologian Peter Lombard (c. 1100-60 CE) and was the standard textbook of Catholic theology until it was superseded by the *Summa* of Aquinas.
23. Tillich relates that it was through his reading of the absolute idealist Friedrich Shelling's (1768-1854 BCE) philosophical interpretation of Christine doctrine that he was first moved "to a unification of theology and philosophy" (*On the Boundary*, p. 51). Other decisive philosophical influences on Tillich were Kierkegaard,

- 
- Heidegger and Nietzsche (p. 56). Tillich described his philosophical orientation as a "fifty-fifty" mix of essentialist and existentialist outlooks (*Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology*, p. 245).
24. Buber writes: "Divine truth, according to a saying of Franz Rosenzweig, wishes to be implored "with both hands" that of philosophy and that of theology." Quoted by Martin Buber in *Eclipse of God. Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, p. 45. Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929 BCE) was one of the outstanding figures in theological existentialism and in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Born into a completely assimilated Jewish family in Cassel, while he was preparing for baptism in the Protestant church, Rosenzweig experienced a spiritual confirmation of his Jewish identity in an orthodox synagogue in Berlin on Yom Kippur (October 11, 1913). Rosenzweig's experience cannot be described as a religious conversion, but rather a reaffirmation of his Jewishness since as he simply stated at the outcome of his experience: "I will remain a Jew". He subsequently pursued Jewish-Christian dialogue in a way that did justice to both religions. Rosenzweig's most well-known book is *The Star of Redemption* (1921) which continues to have a steady influence. (From the introduction, *German Essays in Religion*, pp. 189-90 and the "Introduction" of *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* by editor Paul Mendes-Flohr, colleague of Martin Buber).
  25. *Ibid*, p. 44-45.
  26. Information for note to be supplied by Vahid Rafati.
  27. See, for example, the letter by Juan R.I. Cole to the editor of *World Order* (Fall 1987/Winter 1987-88) in appreciation of Nadir Saiedi's instructive article "Faith, Reason, and Society in Bahá'í Perspective", *World Order*, (Spring/Summer 1987) pp. 9-22 in which Cole wrote: "...I find Professor Saiedi's article a fine, and exciting, starting-point for the development of a serious Bahá'í systematic theology, a task I hope he will address".
  28. For an instructive overview of the implications of deconstruction for religion, see the thematic issue "Deconstruction" in *Religion and Intellectual Life*, vol. 5, no. 2, Winter, 1988.
  29. The point was made by Robert Detweiler in "No Place to Start: Introducing Deconstruction" in *Religion and Intellectual Life*, vol. 5, no. 2, Winter 1988, p.7.
  30. Scholasticism originally aimed at a rational explanation of revealed truth by a dialectic which in its early beginnings attempted to follow Aristotle's logic. In time it came to consider epistemological and metaphysical concerns on their own terms such as the respective roles of faith and reason and the controversy over universals between the Realists and the Nominalists. In theology proper a variety of subjects was treated, mainly on the gospel theme of redemption. Of decisive influence in the formation of scholasticism was not only the works of Aristotle, but also those of Avicenna (Ibn Síná) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd). Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* was the undisputed crowning achievement of scholasticism.
  31. One of Kierkegaard's main critiques of the predominant Hegelian philosophy of his day was that it abstracted the individual to the point of his becoming non-existent or meaningless. In the irony that typified much of his writings, Kierkegaard wrote: "Abstract thought thus helps me with respect to my immortality by first annihilating me as a particular existing individual and then making me immortal, about as when the doctor in Holbert killed the patient with his medicine — but also expelled the fever." Unidentified source quoted by John Updike in "Kierkegaard", *Atlantic Brief Lives. A Biographical Companion to the Arts* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1965), p. 430.
  32. In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle discoursed on being throughout books *Gamma*, *Delta*, *Zeta*, *Theta*, and *Lambda*. Aristotle criticised the sciences of his day by saying: "For none of them looks upon being on the whole or generally; but each, isolating some part, gets a view of the whole only incidentally, as do the mathematical sciences." (p. 61) Aristotle's definition of philosophy was that of a science which systematically examined all being: "Now, to sum up, there is a single science that must view systematically being as being and whatever belongs to it as being. And the same science examines both primary beings and whatever attributes they have, including the considerations named, and also "before" and "after", genus and species, whole and part, and so forth." (p. 66) (*Book Gamma, Aristotle-Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Hope)
  34. Blake's Motto is from *The Portable Blake*, p. 460.

- 
35. The context of the isolated phrase "unity of doctrine" is the discussion by the Universal House of Justice of its own infallibility and its ability to function without a guardian of the Bahá'í Faith since Shoghi Effendi's death put an end to the line of guardians: "Unity of doctrine is maintained by the existence of the authentic texts of Scripture and the voluminous interpretations of `Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi, together with the absolute prohibition against anyone propounding "authoritative" or "inspired" interpretations or usurping the function of Guardian. Unity of administration is assured by the authority of the Universal House of Justice." *Wellspring of Guidance. Messages of the Universal House of Justice 1963-1968* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 53.
36. Mao taught that the political criterion as well as the artistic should play a role in literary and artistic criticism: "In literary and art criticism there are two criteria, the political and the artistic...". *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, Stuart R. Schram, ed. Bantam Books, 1967, p. 173.
37. "Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting the progress of the arts and sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land." Speech in Peking, February 27, 1957. *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, p. 174.
38. Martin E. Marty, "From the Centripetal to the Centrifugal in Culture and Religion", *Theology Today*, vol. 51, no. 1, April, 1994, p. 15.
39. See Raimundo Panikkar, "The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel — A Meditation on Non-Violence," *Cross Currents* 29 (Summer, 1979). For Panikkar pluralism is a form of theological *Realpolitik* and emerges out of conflict, "when the conflict looms unavoidable" (p. 201). "It is rather that human attitude which faces intolerance without being broken" (p. 222). It is a kind of "here I stand", "there you stand" point of view, but "we will tolerate each other". Other pluralists in Panikkar's camp are John Cobb, Gordon Kaufman and Paul Knitter who stands for "unitive pluralism", that is, "plurality constituting unity". See John B. Cobb, Jr., "Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World" in John Hick and Hasan Askari, eds., *The Experience of Religious Diversity* (1985) and Gordon D. Kaufman, "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness and Christian Theology," in John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1987). See also Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (1985). Joseph M. Kitagawa also deplores the fact that no one doctrinal synthesis has been able to create a unity of the world's religions. See *The Quest for Human Unity*, pp. 233-239.
40. John Hick's view of the unity of the world's great religions which I find quite appealing might be described as a spiritual monism which abstracts the "experiential roots" of the world's great religions as being all "in contact with the same ultimate reality". (p. 146). Hick writes in *God and the Universe of Faiths* (The MacMillan Press 1973): "It is thus possible to consider the hypothesis that they are all, at their experiential roots, in contact with the same ultimate reality, but that their differing experiences of that reality, interacting over the centuries with the different thought-forms of different cultures, have led to increasing differentiation and contrasting elaboration — ..." (p. 146) (my edition from Oneworld 1993). Unlike some critics of Hick, I do not agree that such a religion does not exist in reality, and not only as an abstraction. It exists whenever and wherever it is perceived to exist, and even if it is not perceived to exist. My understanding of the Bahá'í view of the world's great religions is that it points to solid universals or spiritual essences of the great faiths.
41. *Theology for the Third Millennium*, pp. 179, 162.
42. This section does not intend to convey a total rejection of postmodernism and deconstructionism. I have, however, chose to contrast certain elements of postmodernism and deconstructionism that in my estimate do not jibe with the purposes of Bahá'í theology. I have briefly alluded to a more positive correlation in the study of Bahá'í scripture with certain postcritical trends in the study of scripture above. See (i) **Exegesis** above.
43. Peter L. Berger, *A Far Glory. The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 77.
44. The perennial philosophy dubbed more recently the primordial tradition is an ancient spiritual philosophy whose proponents included St. Augustine and more recently Aldous Huxley and contemporary comparative religionists and scholars of the world religions such as Huston Smith, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Frithjof Schuon,

---

René Guénon, A.K. Coomaraswamy, Henry Corbin to name but a few lights. Whether John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith can be called primordialists is not clear but they are clearly both advocates of the common core school; in John Hick's case an abstracted monism of the objectified Ultimate Truth or Real (*al Haqq*) and in W.C. Smith's case an advocacy of a world theology based on the totality of the history of religions.

45. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 115.

46. *Paris Talks*, pp. 142-43.

47. By "dispensational religion" I mean a unique divine revelation embodied in a world religion that is meted out to humanity proportionately and cyclically within a given time period, approximately every 500 to 1000 years. Within the period of dispensational religion, the authority of one Prophet or Manifestation of God prevails through the medium of a Holy Book, until the coming of the next major prophet who inaugurates his own dispensation which may change or abrogate formal laws, teachings or customs of the preceding one.

48. Characteristic of Shoghi Effendi's triumphant language in referring to Bahá'u'lláh's revelation are such phrases as: "...the irresistible power of His Law..." (109), "...the superlative character of His Revelation..." (108), "...to vouchsafe still fuller and mightier revelations of His limitless power and glory" (118). Shoghi Effendi also emphasises his points with such phrases as "It would be utterly impossible to over-exaggerate its [the Bahá'í cycle] significance..." (112), "...it emphatically repudiates the claim to be regarded as the final revelation of God's will and purpose for mankind." (115), and "...`Abdu'l-Bahá makes this definite and weighty declaration:" (111), "...it is our clear duty to make it indubitably evident to every seeker after truth..." (118). Exhortative intonations appear in such phrases as: "To whoever may read these pages a word of warning seems, however, advisable before I proceed further with the development of my argument" (112). And, "To strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation, must, it is my unalterable conviction, remain the first obligation and the object of the constant endeavor of each one of its loyal adherents" (100). All quotations from "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*.

49. George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 58.

50. Source from Derrida's *Writing and Difference* to be supplied.

51. The names cited in note 44 apply here.

52. "Warn, O Salmán, the beloved of the one true God, not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men. Let them rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of openmindedness and loving sympathy." Bahá'u'lláh, however, stipulates that those who attack the tenets of the Bahá'í Faith in "inflammatory writings" are to be treated differently. "It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God." (*Gleanings*, p. 329)

53. In his major theological treatise, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Shoghi Effendi writes: "Indeed, the God Who could so incarnate His own reality would, in the light of the teachings of Baha'u'llah, cease immediately to be God. So crude and fantastic a theory of Divine incarnation is as removed from, and incompatible with, the essentials of Baha'i belief as are the no less inadmissible pantheistic and anthropomorphic conceptions of God — both of which the utterances of Baha'u'llah emphatically repudiate and the fallacy of which they expose." (*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* pp, 112-13) Shoghi Effendi also writes that the view that would profess a cessation of divine revelation, and a temporal end to the succession of Messengers of God "would indeed be nothing less than sheer blasphemy". (WOE p. 58) Shoghi Effendi further wrote that to in any way degrade the station of `Abdu'l-Bahá by identifying Him with any of His legitimate successors "would be an act of impiety as grave as the no less heretical belief that inclines to exalt Him to a state of absolute equality with either the central Figure or Forerunner of our Faith. (WOE, p. 132) A further evidence of such unequivocal statements as the mark of a dogmatic theology is as follows. In the teaching or interpretation of the Bahá'í Faith as it pertains to the reading of scripture, Shoghi Effendi also wrote that: "To discard the

---

authority of the revealed Words is heretic....". (*Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 25).

54. *Wellspring of Guidance*, p. 52.

55. I am using the phrase "liberal theology" in a general sense. I do not intend a connection with the theology of the same name as liberalism or liberal Protestantism associated with the back to Kant movement of Albrecht Ritschl and its representatives like Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) which was anti-mystical, anti-metaphysical and anti-dogmatic and identified Christianity essentially with a theology of moral values or ethics which the bourgeois European of the time found so appealing.

56. Cited by the Universal House of Justice in a letter to an individual, 19 October, 1993. The complete quotation reads: "It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and *to correlate* them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth [emphasis mine].

57. The full quotation reads: "It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and *to correlate* them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth." [emphasis mine] Cited in *ibid*.

58. *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 329.

59. Toybee wrote: "Of all the Judaic religions, Baháism is the most tolerant. In its catholicity, it comes near to Mahayanian Buddhism or to Hinduism." *Christianity Among the Religions of the World*, p. 104.

60. Shoghi Effendi's recommendation also called for "special attention" to the immediate Islamic background that attended the birth of the Bábí-Bahá'í Faiths (*Ibid*).

61. Stephen Lambden also maintains that many *alwáh* (tablets) of Bahá'u'lláh especially those of the pre-1863 period such as the "From the Divine Garden" (*Az Bagh-i illáhi*) and "Tablet of Reality" (*Lawh-i Haqq*) are Sufistic in terminology and hermeneutics. Lambden mentions that the Báb "so championed the transcendent unknowability of God that [Sufi] pantheistic/monistic understandings of *wahdat al-wújúd* ("oneness of Being") were explicitly rejected in the Báb's Persian *Equitable Tract* (*Sah[[fa-yi `adliyya*)" (late 1847-early 1847 ; n.p. n.d. p.16). Lambden also refers to Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahs\_ (d.1826 C.E.) as also having rejected Sufi monistic notions of the oneness of being. See Stephen N. Lambden's article "The Seven Valleys of Bahá'u'lláh": Provisional Translation With Occasional Notes — Part 01" in *The Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, Vol. 6, Nos. 2-3, February 1992. The reference in my article is from p. 27.

62. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 409.

63. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 410.

64. Berger, *A Far Glory*, p. 99.

65. Juan Ricardo Cole, "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings", *Bahá'í Studies*. No. 9. Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, p. 18.

66. "Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes, Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 65).

67. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, December 10, 1947 in Helen Hornby, comp., *Lights of Guidance A Bahá'í Reference File* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 421:1144.

68. *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, trans. M. Gail with A.K. Khan. 3d ed. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978) p. 50.

69. Berger, *A Far Glory*, p. 99.



- 
70. *Reality of Man* p. 9. In a talk entitled "The Power of Thought", `Abdu'l-Bahá differentiated "philosophers" from "spiritual teachers" by the application of their thinking. According to `Abdu'l-Bahá, the philosopher is sometimes unable "to show forth his grand ideals in his own life", while the spiritual teacher "...is the first to follow his own teaching". (p. 9)
71. *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 102.
72. *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 274.
73. Juan Ricardo Cole has alluded to a resemblance between `Abdu'l-Bahá's *`ilm-i vujúdí* with that of Plotinus' primal intellection in the *Enneads*, V. 3,2 and a similar notion in Avicenna, *De Anima*, 248-49. See "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings", n. 149, 35.
74. Bahá'u'lláh writes for example: "And yet, is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent." *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 240-41.
75. Reinhold Niebuhr writes that "*Nous* may be translated as "spirit" but the primary emphasis lies upon the capacity for thought and reason." Aristotle distinguished the *nous* more sharply from the soul than did Plato. For Plato the *nous* is the highest element in the soul. (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941, 1:4-25.) [p.]
76. Northrop Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), 74 quoted in P. Joseph Cahill, "Literary Criticism, religious literature, and theology", *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, *Revue canadienne/A Canadian Journal*, 12:1, 1983, 55.
77. What became *Leçons de philosophie* was based on an outline of Weil's lecture notes to her *lycée* students of philosophy. About the authenticity of Weil's text, Peter Winch says in his introduction to Hugh Price's translation *Lectures on Philosophy*: "The *Lectures* do not come directly from Simone Weil's own hand but consist of notes of her lectures at the Roanne *lycée* taken by Madame Anne Reynaud-Guérithault, one of her students in 1933-4." (p. 3) Winch feels, however, that "there is no doubt that we have here a very substantial presentation of what was said in the lectures". (p. 3)
78. The saying is usually attributed to Socrates. Whether Socrates originated the saying or merely perpetuated it, is not clear.
79. *Lectures on Philosophy*, p. 190.
80. *Lectures on Philosophy*, p. 190. The *pythia* or Delphic prophetess at Apollo's shrine sat on a tripod and in a trance-like state gave out her oracles. H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell state that "What the inquirer at Delphoi or one of the other shrines took away from him was not the actual words of the seer, but an edited official record, generally in different hexameters, couched for the most part in very riddling and obscure language, so that if the apparent sense of the prophecy proved false, the god could always take refuge behind another interpretation" (*The Delphic Oracle 2, The Oracular Responses* (Oxford 1956).
81. *Lectures on Philosophy*, p. 191.
82. Simone Weil, *Lectures in Philosophy*, p. 190.
83. Weil makes this claim because she says that one cannot "come to grips" with such concepts as the Will and Intelligence. As for "emotional states", she says that "one can only lay hold of those emotional states that have passed." She says further that there is a fragment of self that continues to exist from moment to moment but the term self itself disappears with time (*Lectures on Philosophy*, p. 191).
84. *Lectures on Philosophy*, p. 193.
85. "...self has really two meanings, or is used in two senses, in the Bahá'í writings; one is self, the identity of the individual created by God. This is the self mentioned in such passages as 'he hath known God who hath known himself etc.' The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. it is this self we must struggle against, or this side of our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain

---

perfection." From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, December 10, 1947 in *Lights of Guidance*, comp. Helen Hornby, 1144:421. (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 1983)

86. The term was coined by Max Müller.
87. note to be completed.
88. "Conversation with David Tracy", *Cross Currents. The Journal of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life*, p. 293, hereafter "Conversation".
89. *Ibid.*
90. "Conversation", pp. 294-95.
91. Spirituality in its theological mode was the approach I used in writing *Dimensions in Spirituality. Reflections on the Meaning of Spiritual Life and Transformation in Light of the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994).
92. `Abdu'l-Bahá said: "Wherefore it is incumbent upon all Bahá'ís to ponder this very delicate and vital matter in their hearts, that, unlike other religions, they may not content themselves with the noise, the clamor, the hollowness of religious doctrine. Nay, rather, they should exemplify in every aspect of their lives those attributes and virtues that are born of God and should arise to distinguish themselves by their goodly behavior." *The Divine Art of Living*, p. 25 (first edition)
93. Marcus Bach, *A Meeting With Shoghi Effendi*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993), p. 34.
94. `Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that "the ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics" constitute "the fundamental aspect of the religion of God". The complete quotation is: "These [essential spiritual teachings] are faith in God, the acquirement of virtues which characterize perfect manhood, praiseworthy morals, the acquisition of the bestowals and bounties emanating from the divine effulgences — in brief, the ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics. This is the fundamental aspect of the religion of God, and this is of the highest importance because knowledge of God is the fundamental requirement of man" (*Promulgation* p. 403).
95. What I intend by "the classical sense of the word" regarding prophethood is the divine election of a pure, singular soul who is called by God to deliver a specific teaching, and accomplish a definite mission within a "dispensation", a time frame during which the prophet's authority is exercised until the advent of the subsequent Divine Manifestation. Dispensation prophethood is thus characterised by the legacy of a Holy Book, and the bequeathing of a rich cultural heritage to the world, that takes form as a high culture or civilisation (Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.) is [complete]. The Bahá'í Faith maintains, consequently, a more restrictive definition of the word "prophet" than the one sometimes used more loosely to refer to a charismatic individual, or one who propounds an original or unique teaching. Such individuals as Newman, Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard, Ghandi, Swedenborg, Blake, Martin Luther King or religious reformers such as Joseph Smith would not be considered prophets by Bahá'ís.
96. An important consideration which I leave out of this discussion is the role of the prophets as progenitors of civilization and culture.
97. See Paul Deussen, *The System of the Vedánta*, Trans. Charles Johnston. New Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1972, p. 102.
98. *The Silence of God. The Answer of the Buddha*, p. 175.
99. I have wrenched this little phrase from its context and put it to a different use above, but one that seems to be in harmony with the intent of the divine words. In the *Asl-i-Kullul'l-Khayr* (Words of Wisdom) Bahá'u'lláh writes: "The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 157)
100. *Gleanings*, p. 48. The quaranic quotation is from 2:253, Surah "The Cow".
101. *Gleanings*, p. 48.

- 
102. *Gleanings*, p. 50.
  103. *Gleanings*, p. 54.
  104. *Gleanings*, pp. 59-60.
  105. Some may view this prophecy as having been fulfilled in the coming of Muhammad since the parallels between the missions of Moses with those of Muhammad are closer. However, the words of Jesus quoted above indicate that Moses had prophesied the coming of Christ, and `Abdu'l-Bahá's statement below (see note 68) clearly indicates that Moses had prophesied Christ.
  106. *Gleanings*, p. 51.
  107. "His Holiness Abraham covenanted with regard to Moses. His Holiness Moses was the promised One of Abraham, and he, Moses covenanted with regard to His Holiness Christ, saying that Christ was the promised One. His Holiness Christ covenanted with regard to His Holiness "The Paraclete" [John 14:26], which means His Holiness Muhammad. His Holiness Muhammad covenanted as regards the Báb, whom he called "My promised One", His Holiness the Báb, in all his books, in all his epistles, explicitly covenanted with regard to the Blessed Beauty, Bahá'u'lláh, that Bahá'u'lláh was the promised One of His Holiness the Báb." (*The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 67-68)
  108. For a discussion in Bahá'í perspective of Muhammad as *Khátam*, see Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir in "A Bahá'í Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam", *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 5:3, September-December, 1993, pp. 27-28.
  109. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Comparative Religion: Wither — and Why?" in *The History of Religions. Essays in Methodology*, p. 33.
  110. *Gleanings*, p. 52.
  111. Marcus Bach, *A Meeting With Shoghi Effendi*, p. 40.
  112. *Ibid.*
  113. See Isa. 6; Jer. 1; Ezek. 1:1-3:15; Amos 7:15.
  114. Max Weber first introduced the term "charisma" into the language of the sociologist as having derived from a religious context. See Max Weber *On Charisma and Institution Building*, Selected Papers, edited and with an Introduction by S. N. Eisenstadt, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968). See especially "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority", pp. 18-27 in which Weber distinguishes "personal" charisma from the charisma of "office".
  115. *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 74. The context of the discussion is the symbolic meaning of "clouds".
  116. William Alexander Leslie Elmslie, "Prophets", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1959 ed.
  117. *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 5.
  118. *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 6.
  119. Letter of 19 December 1798 quoted by Nietzsche in the opening line of the preface to *Von Nutzen and Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1874). *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, translated with an introduction by Peter Preuss, (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), p. 7.
  120. Elmslie, "Prophet". I have added the parentheses.
  121. Huston Smith, "Postmodernism's Impact on the Study of Religion", in M. Darrol Bryant editor, *Huston Smith Essays on World Religion*, p. 267.
  122. `Abdu'l-Bahá cited in *Principles of Bahá'í Administration, A Compilation*, p. 41.
  123. "Interfaith and the Future" in *The Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol 4, no. 1, 1994, p. 4.
  124. *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.
  125. In *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* Smith argues that science can never produce a "worldview" because it possesses a partial not a total view of the cosmos since the human being as spiritual being is conspicuously

---

absent: "To hope for a world view from science is like hoping that increasingly detailed maps of Illinois will eventually produce the ultimate map of the United States." (p. 109).

126. Summarized from Hick in *ibid*, pp. 5-7.
127. Krause was a lesser known but enlightened German philosopher and a contemporary of Hegel who wrote *Das Urbild der Menschheit (The Archetype of Man)* (1811). *Das Urbild der Menschheit* explored the idea of the self, and the dualistic idea of the union of body (matter) and soul (spirit). Self, body and soul implied a higher Ultimate Reality, God, who transcended the opposition of body and spirit, and nature itself. Krause reflected that totality thinking that was typical of the absolute idealists and which is so strikingly similar to pantheism, but he departed from them in several respects. Something of a pragmatist, Krause believed that humanity could only realise its function in perfecting society. *Das Urbild der Menschheit* included reflections on law and ethics, and the nature of religion which he depicted as humanity's struggle for union with God.
128. Einstein writes in *Ideas and Opinions*: "His [the scientist's] religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection. This feeling is the guiding principle of his life and work, in so far as he succeeds in keeping himself from the shackles of selfish desire. It is beyond question closely akin to that which has possessed the religious geniuses of all ages." (p. 50)
129. Incarnation theology is replaced in the Bahá'í Faith by the doctrine of emanation which overcomes some of the serious objections to incarnationalism. Aquinas [def. of person].
130. *Ibid*, p. 112.
131. *The Idea of the Holy*, p.[...]
132. This school which was very influential from about 1900 into the post world war two years combined many applications of the historical-critical method with the comparative history of religions in a more scientific analysis of the origins of Judaism and Christianity. The group's main contribution lay in its understanding of biblical writings and theological ideas in the light of textual criticism and the history of religions. The school began with a group of scholars at the University of Göttingen which included Ernst Troeltsch and a later third generation member, Rudolf Bultmann. The school looked upon Albert Eichhorn as "the decisive influence" (p. 293) in their work. For a succinct summary of the history and intellectual orientation of the school, see Kurt Rudolph's "Religionsgeschichtliche Schule" in Mircea Eliade editor, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 293-95
133. See, for example, Herman Gunkel's *Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Verständnis des Neuen Testament (On the Understanding of the New Testament in Light of the History of Religions)*.
134. An anecdote related by Emogene Hoagg to Nellie French in a letter from Haifa, Palestine dated January 2, 1922 states that during the fortieth day memorial feast given by the "Holy Family" to honor the ascension of `Abdu'l-Bahá, a Muslim who gave one of the approximately twelve eulogies "proved by reference to the Koran, all the Twelve Principles as given [by `Abdu'l-Bahá] in America." It would have to be a real *tour de force* however to prove, for example, the equality of men and women and the other Bahá'í principles from the Quran, principles which `Abdu'l-Bahá himself has stated are not found in the previous scriptures of the world's religions. One would find however more direct parallels in the specifics of Sufi and Islamic theology with the theology of the Bahá'í Faith. Emogene Hoagg, "Letter From Haifa in the Mourning Time", *World Order*, vol. 6, no. 2, Winter 1971-72, p. 36.
135. The Department of the Secretariat of The Universal House of Justice, letter to an individual, 5 January 1995.
136. *Ibid*.
137. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 154.
138. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 60-61.