

Foreword

*Time is a strange thing.*¹

In resolving to make ‘time’ and the ‘Badí‘ calendar’ the subject of a thoroughgoing investigation – a topic which has until now by and large escaped scrutiny and whose significance is as yet little appreciated – my friend Gerald Keil has ventured into difficult territory. Bahá’ís are generally aware of the basic structure of the new calendar and can appreciate its contribution to the consolidation of their Bahá’í identity, for it provides the temporal framework for their daily prayers, their monthly gatherings, their days of commemoration, the period of fasting and the New Year festival (Naw-Rúz). Its inherent symbolism, however, has until now remained largely unexplored, so that the systematic investigation presented by this wide-ranging, impressive study is no doubt the first of its kind.

The passage of time is measurable. Rigidly periodic processes such as the rotation of the Earth on its axis, its orbit around the sun, the succession of the moon phases, or the pulsations of a pendulum, quartz crystal or atom, provide *objective* forms of periodicity by means of which the passage of time can be quantified. This natural concept of time is closely linked with astronomy and theoretical physics.

Subjective time, the experience of objectively measurable periods of time in human conscience, is an altogether different matter. The same span of time can, as everyone knows, be experienced in widely varying ways. We experience as slow and burdensome time which simply passes without anything happening in particular, such as when standing in a queue or waiting for a bus or train; but when we are diverted or entertained the same physical span of time flies by quickly, and the rare moments in which we experience real happiness are fleeting in the extreme, as Goethe puts it:

Werd’ ich zum Augenblicke sagen,

Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!

I will beseech the moment’s time,

Abide a while! Thou art sublime!²

That which has already transpired and which we collectively consider noteworthy or important becomes history, and the question whether world history makes any sense at all — the endless historical episodes, the rise and fall of systems of political rule, the origin and demise of great cultures — is the subject of the philosophy of history.³ History is an empirical science; but since

human reason is capable of judging very little concerning the meaning and goal of history, the interpretation of world history lies beyond the reach of empirical knowledge. Without appeal to religion and theology, history remains uninterpreted.⁴

According to Bahá'í teaching, God is the Lord of history. He manifests Himself to mankind through His successive prophets and messengers, leading mankind progressively to salvation. World history is *salvation history*. It proceeds in universal cycles, within which the founders of the world's great religions leave behind historical caesurae, each of which invariably gives rise to a new chronology. The Adamic⁵ cycle entered its final phase with the coming of Muhammad, the last prophet in this series and accordingly called the 'Seal of the Prophets'⁶ in the Qur'án, who foretells the great upheaval at the end of days, the 'Day of Decision'.⁷

With the coming of the Báb a new universal era began and the 'prophetic cycle' attained fulfilment: The 'Day of Resurrection'⁸ was the advent of the new Revelation. The consummation of mankind will take place during the new cycle which began with the Báb. The fulfilment of the prophetic promises of the unity of mankind and of the messianic kingdom of peace will follow in the wake of an upheaval of apocalyptic proportions. The Badí' calendar, revealed by the Báb in his Persian Bayán⁹ and taken over in slightly modified form by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i Aqdas,¹⁰ signalizes both: the incursion of transcendence through God's self-revelation and the upheaval announced to mankind, in which the 'present-day order [will] be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead.'¹¹

The Báb, as his adopted title implies, had at first raised his claim within the traditional Shí'ite paradigm of expectation, in conformity with the concept of the *Babú'l-Imám* (Gate to the Hidden Imám). He withheld from revealing his true spiritual identity for a considerable period of time and, like the Jesus of the Gospel of St Mark, kept his 'messianic secret'¹² concealed. Only gradually did he announce his prophetic claim to be a Manifestation of God, a claim which transcended the horizon of expectation of the orthodox Shí'a. At the Conference of Badásht in 1848 some of the prominent members of his community announced the abolition of Islamic religious law.

Yet the true claim of the Báb was discernible in his writings from the very beginning.¹³ The abrogation of the Islamic *sharí'a* is impossible to overlook, especially in the Persian Bayán, which he composed during his imprisonment in Máh-Kú. The change which he undertook in the *basmala*¹⁴ alone clearly demonstrates the break with the past. In this work, the Báb not only announced his teachings, rejuvenating all aspects of religious life, he also introduced a new religious law,¹⁵ thus making clear that his mission was far more than an Islamic reform movement: he endowed mankind with an independent revealed religion, with its own 'Book', its own teachings, its own legal system and its own ritual. He thereby accomplished what no Islamic reformer had ever managed: a complete severing with the past. And nothing makes this severance more explicit than a new basis of time calculation and a new calendar.¹⁶

One might wonder what the purpose of the Bayánic law was, many of the details of which appear strange and severe to the uninitiated Western reader and which was ultimately to be superceded by the legislation of the Kitáb-i Aqdas less than two decades later.¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi provides an answer to this question:

. . . the Bábí Dispensation was essentially in the nature of a religious and indeed social revolution, and its duration had therefore to be short, but full of tragic events, of sweeping and drastic reforms. Those drastic measures enforced by the Báb and His followers were taken with the view of undermining the very foundations of Shí‘ih orthodoxy, and thus paving the way for the coming of Bahá’u’lláh.¹⁸

Designedly severe in the rules and regulations it imposed, revolutionizing in the principles it instilled, calculated to awaken from their age-long torpor the clergy and the people, and to administer a sudden and fatal blow to obsolete and corrupt institutions, it proclaimed, through its drastic provisions, the advent of the anticipated Day . . .¹⁹

The Badí‘ calendar promulgated in the Persian Bayán is to be numbered among the revolutionary innovations which convulsed the bastions of Islamic orthodoxy; it heralded the end of the Islamic era with unsurpassable clarity, to the chagrin of the Islamic authorities. Even recently, in a Sunnite fatwa from the 1990s, the fact that the Badí‘ year consists of nineteen months, when of course everyone knows that there are only twelve, was noted with particular indignation.

Gerald Keil has not restricted his investigations to the historical background, the theological implications and symbolic significance of the new calendar; nearly half of his study is devoted to the problems surrounding its practical introduction. A glance at the table of contents for Part III already intimates how difficult it will one day be for the Universal House of Justice officially to implement this new calendar so that it may serve Bahá’ís the world over as their sole time system. The problems to be solved are highly complex; they range from the clarification of the written sources, through the multifaceted astronomical considerations, the various possibilities for resolving the issue of the reference point for determining the day of Naw-Rúz, up to new possibilities and challenges such as ‘Badí‘ time’ and the nineteen-day life rhythm.

It is obvious that the official, formal introduction of the Badí‘ calendar is not the most pressing issue facing us today. The Bahá’í community must progress much further before this matter becomes topical. We cannot predict when the critical point will be reached – we might continue to approach it slowly and steadily, or we might get there spontaneously, suddenly spurred on by unexpected events. But an appreciable span of time will undoubtedly lapse before the calendar project can be taken up in earnest.

It is therefore legitimate to ask what the point is of such a detailed introduction into the problems associated with the introduction of a new form of reckoning time. After all, the task will fall to the Universal House of Justice, which, when the time is ripe, will enact the necessary supplementary legislation. In the light of the exclusive competency of the House of Justice in this question, can it be at all legitimate and sensible to discuss the abundance of matters that will

eventually need to be resolved? Wouldn't it be better simply to place one's complete trust in the wisdom and infallible leadership of the Supreme Body, which, when the appropriate time has come, will do what is right and necessary? Isn't the production of a study such as this in fact tantamount to meddling in the affairs of the Universal House of Justice?

Such objections overlook several important considerations.

As I have pointed out elsewhere,²⁰ the decisions of the Universal House of Justice are not revelational in character. The Universal House of Justice is not a mere recipient, transformer and mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit. Its decisions do not come about through quasi-prophetic inspiration (*'quasi per inspirationem'*, *'Divino afflante Spiritu'*),²¹ but instead they are arrived at in the course of a rational discursive process in which, subsequent to the establishment of the facts and the clarification of the normative guidelines set out in the Writings, a formal process of consultation leads to a consensus, and finally to a decision reached by majority vote or by the achievement of unanimity.

As the Universal House of Justice has expressly stated, it is not omniscient.²² Like any other decision-making body, the Universal House of Justice is dependent on information. The divine, unerring guidance which is vouchsafed to the Universal House of Justice does not hover over it like a *deus ex machina*. Instead, it manifests itself through the conduct of consultation which precedes the decision stage and in this manner enables infallible decisions through the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Legislation is a highly complex process and impossible without expert knowledge. Among the necessary foundations are legal dogmatics and legal techniques, but every act of legislation also requires that the legislator have at his disposal all-encompassing knowledge of the relevant material. The introduction of calendar legislation presupposes that all astronomical and technical information pertaining to the calendar be considered and befittingly taken into account in the legislation. No lawgiver in the world could draft such legislation without the support of competent experts.

The procedure of clarifying all relevant questions cannot begin early enough, since the 'shining spark of truth' will first come forth after all the various differing points of view have undergone the ordeal of a public scientific discourse, so that those positions which do not stand up against critical examination need no longer be taken into consideration. Such discourse conducted world-wide can, in the first instance, relieve the wheat of much chaff. Profiting from the collective reasoning of the community at large, open discourse over the Badi' calendar would enable a preliminary scrutiny of all legal, technical and historical questions. Its fruits would represent a valuable source of information for the commission of experts which will one day be convened for the purpose of preparing the ground for the calendar legislation. This commission would not have to begin at square one, so to speak, but instead would profit from the results of informed discourse.

Any open discourse, any exchange of arguments, must be carried out in the spirit of mutual respect and forbearance, oriented on the cardinal virtues of moderation and wisdom. Open dialogue over specific questions is the ‘trial by ordeal’ for diverse points of view. It leads closer to the truth, even if it does not necessarily result in consensus. Such a discourse can be likened to scientific procedure, in which hypotheses are continuously being tested against the evidence of reality and, if found wanting, rejected in favour of new hypotheses in a never-ending process of inching forward towards the truth. We, too, must reflect upon our Faith in this fashion, since the Bahá’í Faith is, as Shoghi Effendi explained, ‘scientific in its method’.²³

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained how rational dialogue is to be conducted:

Every subject presented to a thoughtful audience must be supported by rational proofs and logical arguments.²⁴

In other words, he who expounds a thesis is obliged to provide proofs in support of his position. He must present rational, logical arguments. But that also implies that his fellow participants in dialogue must address the arguments presented. They must come to terms with them and in the end explain not only what they find acceptable or otherwise, but why.

Man is a thinking being, one who strives to understand and one who poses questions in order to improve his comprehension. A Bahá’í is not content simply with believing in holy scripture, he also wants to *understand* it. God speaks to mankind in human language, and language is dependent on analysis, on interpretation. In this respect, every contact with the Writings is an act of analysis and interpretation. Even during the most casual perusal of a text the reader is at pains to understand it, i.e. he interprets *in pectore* while reading. Everything we say about the Word of God is based on personal interpretation of the Writings, whether we speak in private circles, in public, or indeed at any time while engaged in teaching and proclamation. Our understanding may be correct, or it may be in error – in any event we cannot claim any authority with respect to it.

The yearning to reach an *understanding* of the Faith is incidentally not merely the predilection of the thinking individual; it is, as Shoghi Effendi stressed, the duty of every believer. The Guardian enjoined the believers time and again to ‘strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá’u’lláh’s stupendous Revelation’, to acquire ‘a clearer apprehension of the truths it enshrines and the principles on which it is based’.²⁵

In his effort to achieve a proper understanding of scripture, the individual makes use of his ability to reason. According to the scripture, God has given a unique rank to the rational faculty, to ‘*aql* (reason, mind, intellect):

First and foremost among these favours, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding [‘*aql*]. His purpose in conferring such a gift is none other except to enable His creature to know and recognize the one true God – exalted be His glory. This gift giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets

of creation.²⁶

However, reason is easily influenced by vested interests. If the individual is not purged of his attachment to his own preferences and preconceptions and to his partiality, reason will be hindered from working through to the truth. Bahá'u'lláh's call to independent search for truth, such that the searcher see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears and know with his own knowledge,²⁷ is well the most revolutionary innovation in His entire revelation and a leitmotif which pervades His writings. Independence of judgement is a condition of justice (*ins&áf*) and has been called 'the essence of all that We have revealed for thee',²⁸ and the purpose of justice is 'for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation [*taqlíd*], discern with the eyes of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look unto all things with a searching eye.'²⁹ Bahá'u'lláh writes, 'scrutinize the writings with thine own eyes'³⁰ . . . scatter the idols of vain imitation [*taqlíd*].³¹

The endeavour 'to arrive at the truth of things',³² the search for a hermeneutic comprehension of texts, is *ijtihád*, the right and the duty of every believer. The Bahá'í community possesses no clergy (see Appendix B), no 'ulamá' with vested authority, no *mujtahids*, and the Bahá'í Faith knows no *taqlíd*, i.e. there exists no circle of authoritative and influential mentors whom one is obliged to follow and imitate unquestioningly. Shoghi Effendi made patently clear that every believer has the right to his own understanding of scripture and that he is entitled to express his opinion:

Shoghi Effendi believes that we should not restrict the liberty of the individual to express his own views so long as he makes it clear that these views are his own. In fact, such explanations are often helpful and are conducive to a better understanding of the teachings. God has given man a rational power to be used and not killed.³³

Gerald Keil has made use of this prerogative – to the benefit of the friends, who as a result will gain valuable insights into a body of material with which few are acquainted. If this study achieves nothing more than to provoke discussion – and it should, because it places a number of long-standing assumptions in question and suggests possible future developments which present genuine challenges to the community – then it will have fulfilled Gerald's own primary objective.

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¹ Hugo v. Hoffmannsthal, libretto of the opera 'Der Rosenkavalier', Act 1, Marschallin.

² Faust, Part 2, Act 5.

³ Löwith, *Meaning in History*, provides an excellent overview of historical-philosophical models.

⁴ The striking parallelism between the Jewish-Christian belief in salvation and political messianism has been discussed in Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion*, pp. 12f. The whole process of history as outlined in the *Communist*

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- Manifesto* corresponds to the general scheme of the Jewish-Christian interpretation of history as a providential advance toward a final goal. The communist philosophy of history has been called ‘a pseudo-morphosis of Jewish-Christian messianism’ (Löwith, *Meaning in History*, pp. 44ff.).
- 5 According to the Qur’án and the Bahá’í teachings, Adam was a prophet.
6 33:40. See also note 7 in Chapter 5 of the present study.
7 Qur’án 78:17.
8 See Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i Íqán*, paras. 121-128, 153, 182 for an allegorical interpretation of this term.
9 Wáhid 5, Chapter 3.
10 paras. 16, 127.
11 Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 4:2; see also 143:3.
12 Mark 8:30; 9:9; see also Matt. 16:20; 17:9; Luke 9:21. On the theme of ‘messianic secret’ see also Gollmer, in Schaefer et al., *Making the Crooked Straight*, pp. 571ff.
13 The self-description of the Báb as *dhikr* und *nuqa* in his Qayyúmu’l-Asma’ already prove this assertion (cf. Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, pp.201ff.; Gollmer, in Schaefer et al., *Making the Crooked Straight*, p. 588, note 61). See also *Unity in diversity: The number nineteen* in Chapter 5 of the present study.
14 In place of the phrase ‘In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate’, which introduces every Súrah in the Qur’án except the 9th, the *Bayán* opens with ‘In the name of God, the Most Inaccessible, the Most Holy’ (see also Persian *Bayán* 3:6 and *A brief history* in Chapter 4 of the present study).
15 The logic of the Roman sentence ‘*Lex posterior derogate legi priori*’ (A later law cancels an earlier: Dig. 1,4,4 (Modestin)) holds for salvation history as well.
16 The reader is referred to Dr Armin Eschraghi’s illuminating article, ‘Undermining the Foundations of Orthodoxy. Some Notes on the Báb’s *Shari’a* (Sacred law)’, forthcoming.
17 Armin Eschraghi offers many details in his informative paper.
18 Shoghi Effendi, quoted from Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i Aqdas*, note 109.
19 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 25.
20 *Making the Crooked Straight*, pp. 180f.
21 As if by inspiration, animated by the Holy Spirit.
22 The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 22 August 1977, available in Ocean Research Library.
23 Shoghi Effendi, *The Bahá’í Faith - The World Religion: A Summary of Its Aims, Teachings and History*; also printed in US Bahá’í News, No. 85 (July 1934), p.1. Available in Ocean Research Library.
24 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, talk given 16 August 1912, in *Promulgation*, p. 253.
25 Shoghi Effendi, ‘The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh’, in *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 100.
26 *Gleanings* 95:1.
27 Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic 2; *Tablets* 17:24; *Gleanings* 75:1; *Kitáb-i Íqán* 176. On the whole subject of the independent search for truth see Schaefer, *Bahá’í Ethics*, vol. 1, pp. 50ff., 68ff., 301ff.; 341ff; vol. 2, § 43, section 4.
28 Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 10:23, p. 157.
29 *Ibid.*
30 *Ibid.* 4:36, p. 43.
31 Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 75:1.
32 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, talk given 10 October 1912, in *Promulgation*, p. 355.
33 *Principles of Bahá’í Administration*, pp. 24f.