

Spiritual Footprints in the Sands of Time by Kevin Brogan

Abstract

Viewing the spiritual evolution of humankind, one is struck by the arrival of great Leaders, Who have given birth to great civilisations like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism and others which predate them. Why did They come to us when They did, what was Their message, and what was Their legacy? The present Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh has in a short time brought about revolutionary changes in scientific and technological advancement and more especially in how we relate to each other spiritually, emotionally, culturally and socially. One of the core theological teachings of the Bahá'í Faith is that of progressive revelation, which explains that God sends Messengers at strategic times to renew and add new life to His covenant with humankind. This paper examines this covenantal relationship between God and humankind by investigating the lives and the work of these Luminaries and by examining the common features of each of the dispensations listed above. By examining the societies in which These Messengers lived, how They led Their followers in times of tribulation, Their courageous dedication to God's Revelation, and Their hazardous journeys to bring whole civilisations back to God's covenant, it is hoped that readers may better understand the legacy bestowed on us by Bahá'u'lláh.

Introduction

For some time I have been intrigued by the appearance of the Founders of the great religions at crucial points in history; it is 'through the rise of these Luminaries of God the world is made new, the waters of everlasting life stream forth, the billows of loving-kindness surge, the clouds of grace are gathered, and the breeze of bounty bloweth upon all created things.'¹ I found that the Bahá'í doctrine of Progressive Revelation answered my questions about these 'Luminaries of God.' Their appearance at strategic points in humankind's evolution demonstrate that 'Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, "abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith."² Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, explained it succinctly in his

Summary Statement to the Special UN Committee on Palestine in 1947:

Bahá'ís believe that religious revelation is continuous and progressive and that, from the very beginning of human history, God has periodically sent divine educators to the world to guide mankind. The appearance of these divine educators - Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad and, in our own age, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh - has signified the founding of a new religion, and yet none of these religions is really new; they are stages in the unfoldment of the same religious truth proceeding from the same God. They teach the same, unchanging spiritual principles, and they differ only in their social teachings, which vary according to the needs of the age in which they were revealed.³

On examining what has been recorded of these Messengers in greater detail, one finds common threads running through Their lives and that They seemed to arrive at a low ebb in humankind's existence. Their arrival served to give birth to a rise in both physical and spiritual welfare. An examination of these features is the objective of this paper. Despite the fact that very often the lives of these Leaders are so shrouded in legend and myth as to limit the accuracy of the research, one can still determine some truth. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice, quoting from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, states that: 'We cannot be sure of the authenticity of the scriptures of Buddha and Krishna ... ' (25 November 1950); and in reply to a question as to whether Brahma is 'to be considered as referring to absolute deity' and Krishna 'as the Prophet of the Hindu Religion,' the Guardian's secretary wrote: ' ... such matters, as no reference occurs to them in the [Bahá'í] Teachings, are left for students of history and religion to resolve and clarify' (14 April 1941).⁴ It must also be recognised that there were probably hundreds of these Luminaries, most of Whom are consigned to anonymity. For this reason, I have confined this paper to the eight Messengers listed above.

The Common Features

One of the first features one recognises when examining the Messengers is the pattern of Their lives. Each One lived a relatively normal life like others in Their society. This society was usually in a state of decline and there was some evidence that the civic and religious structures were in disarray. Reports of the time indicated that these Luminaries displayed personalities that manifested intelligence and wisdom beyond Their years as They were growing up. At some time in Their adult lives, They received a call or experienced a revelation or gained some enlightenment which was to change Their lives and launch Them on the road to teaching others. Another central feature was the concept of journey, a leaving of the land of Their birth, which often brought Them great suffering. In many cases, there was also a temptation not to answer the call, whereby the Messenger was urged by a devil or 'evil one' to return to Their former lives and to ignore Their calling. Their teaching encapsulated a central message, which set out to change the adherent of the new Faith and to teach him or her how to relate to God and ultimately to their fellow human beings. Finally, there is evidence that when these Messengers departed from this world, usually a civilisation arose which brought spiritual, social and economic prosperity to the lands which adopted the teachings of the religions They had founded.

In examining the lives of the Messengers of God, it is important first to examine the society into which They came and in some way to try to explain, albeit with scanty information, the milieu in which They grew up.

Setting the Scene

In many or most cases, the societies into which the Messengers of God came were in moral decline, often war-torn and, in some cases, the religion of a previous Dispensation was no longer effectively answering the needs of its followers. Abraham, Whose life is said to date back to a period between 2000-1500 BCE,⁵ is thought to have been a member of a semi-nomadic tribe, living in tents, raising sheep and goats, moving their flocks to different pastures in an area between Mesopotamia and Canaan,⁶ much like the Bedouin tribes do today. It was a time of survival, with the Egyptians building lines of fortresses; in one case, we are told that Abraham went to Canaan to seek survival.⁷ Also, there was some

strife between Abraham's herdsmen and His nephew Lot's herdsmen.⁸ Moses lived in the period from the fourteenth to the tenth century BCE at a time when the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians. The story is well-known to us through the Old Testament. He was born to a slave, hidden because there was a decree that all male children should be killed, was found and raised by the Pharaoh's daughter. The plight of the 'people of Israel' was grave and 'they groaned under their bondage and cried out for help and their cry under bondage came up to God.'⁹

In Jesus' time, the Jewish Faith and, more particularly, Mosaic Law were fragmented into different groups like the Pharisees, who believed in cultivating piety through strict and, according to synoptic Gospel accounts, ostentatious observation of the law, the Sadducees, who were strictly conservative and adherents to the law, the Zealots, who urged violent resistance to outsiders (especially the Romans), and the Essenes, who were austere mystics. Following three hundred years of consolidation of Jewish worship and ruthless enforcement of the Mosaic Law, there began persecution, first by Antiochus Epiphanes, the Hellenistic monarch of Syria, and later in 37 BCE, when the Romans invaded. Jesus was born into a very depressed society, and this continued after His death with the extinction of the Jewish nation, the sacking of Jerusalem by the Roman forces under the general, Titus, in 70 CE, and the subsequent dispersal of the Jewish nation after a revolt in 132 CE.

In pre-Mosaic Iran, Zoroaster (the Greek rendering of the Persian name Zarathustra) and His dispensation dated back to between 650 and 1700 BCE. It is thought that He lived in the area on the borders of modern Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. Tradition has it that he was the son of a camel merchant and grew up in a society which practised a number of polytheistic religions. Little is known of this society, as it is difficult to pinpoint accurately the exact time of His presence on earth.

However, five hundred years after the time of Jesus Christ and in a different part of the Middle East, in modern-day Saudi Arabia, Muhammad also was born into a society that had fallen into decay, like that of Israel in the time of Jesus. The larger part of the Arabian population had reverted to a nomadic existence.¹⁰ Religious practice among the Arab tribes combined both polytheistic and animistic elements and there was a cult of sacred

stones from which power was said to emanate.¹¹ The Quraysh tribe to which Muhammad belonged paid special reverence to Al-Uzza, a prominent deity associated with the present Ka'aba in Mecca. The Ka'aba was a cube-like structure built over a black stone and in it were many images of gods and goddesses, although it did not contain an image of what worshippers saw as the distant high god, Allah (Arabic 'the God'). There is evidence that tribal warfare was very common because, as has been noted by Ninian Smart, each year there was a truce between the tribes for four months to enable tribes from outlying areas to visit the shrine.¹² It is highly probable that Muhammad would also have come in contact with Jews and Christians in the cities of Mecca, Medina and Taif: half of the population of Medina was Jewish, while the Monophysite and Nestorian Christian Churches were gaining converts in Mecca. It was into this melting pot of religions that Muhammad was born.

Moving further eastward to the Indian traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, it is extremely difficult to examine the environments in which their Founders were born. This is particularly true in the case of Krishna, partly because His life is surrounded in myth and also because Hinduism combines many different theological and cultural traditions. Tradition does tell us, however, that He was the son of a local chieftain in a setting where constant battles raged between tribes. Siddhartha Gautama, whose name was later changed to Buddha (the Enlightened One), was also born into the family of a chieftain in Kapilavastu, just inside the borders of what is now Nepal in 563 BCE.¹³ We are told that His father tried to shield Him from the facts of old age, sickness and death,¹⁴ which might also give some indication of the segregated society in which He grew up.

There seem to be strong indications, therefore, that the settings for the early lives of the Messengers of God were at best turbulent and at worst both dangerous and inhumane, places where violence, persecution, and man's inhumanity to man were the order of the day. Religion was either at a primitive stage (as with Abraham and Zoroaster) or the established religion had degenerated into a stage of decadence where the institutions seemed to have lost sight of the central message of the Founder (as with Buddha, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad). Such was the case also when the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh lived in nineteenth-century Iran. By the eighteenth century, all the largest Muslim empires –

Mughal, Ottoman, Safavid, Moroccan and Central Asian – had ‘degenerated politically, militarily, economically and culturally from their heydays in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ... were subject to increasing economic instability, and were increasingly dominated by entrenched hereditary elites, including those among the landed gentry, palace guards, military castes, local princes, religious leaders and Sufi orders.’¹⁵ At that time Iran was ruled by the Qajar tribe from 1794 to 1925, and provincial governors had considerable power, while the urban areas were ruled by the military and high-ranking *‘ulama* (leading clergy) and the people were to a large extent illiterate. In the countryside the tribes of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists ‘came and went as they pleased, frequently dominating the settled population.’¹⁶ Who, then, were these diverse Messengers of God?

To a large extent, research has found that They experienced the same childhood as Their contemporaries. It could be pointed out that some of Them had a more privileged upbringing than other children of Their time. Moses lived a life of nobility, as did Krishna, Buddha and Bahá’u’lláh, which would have meant that They probably received some education. However, it is stated by J.E. Esslemont that Bahá’u’lláh never attended school.¹⁷ Jesus and Muhammad were born into families that had a trade – Jesus’ stepfather, Joseph, was a carpenter, while Muhammad’s merchant father, Abdullah, died before His birth and His grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, worked providing water from the sacred well of Zamzam. The Báb was born into a family of merchants and traders.

Despite their often privileged upbringing, there is evidence that They were distinguished from other children of Their tribe or society in that They displayed extraordinary qualities in Their childhood. Jesus at twelve years of age amazed the religious leaders in the temple,¹⁸ while Zoroaster as a young person showed ‘a keen interest in religion ... had a compassionate nature, especially towards the elderly;’¹⁹ Muhammad was also said to be ‘of a specially religious disposition. It was his habit to go to the hills to practice prayer and meditation.’²⁰ In the case of the Báb, ‘several accounts emphasise the boy’s extreme piety,’²¹ while Bahá’u’lláh at ‘thirteen or fourteen years old He became renowned for His learning. He would converse on any subject and solve any problem presented to Him. In large gatherings He would discuss

matters with the ‘ulama and would explain intricate religious questions.’²²

God’s Revelation

When one examines the events surrounding God’s revelation, one can be struck by the resemblances. The Book of Genesis reported that God spoke directly to Abraham a number of times and told him to go to Canaan and that ‘I will make of you a great nation, and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.’²³ In this way, Abraham became the Founder of the Jewish Nation when God said to Him: ‘for all the land which you see I will give you and to your descendants for ever.’²⁴ Often an angel or a stranger appeared. It is related that Zoroaster received a vision on the banks of the Daitya River when a large figure who identified himself as Vbhu Manah took Him into the presence of the wise lord, Ahura Mazda, who in turn instructed Zoroaster in the true religion.²⁵ Moses, Who was to become the Founder of the Jewish religion, received His calling when ‘the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.’²⁶ His mission was to ‘bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt.’²⁷ Moses was spoken to by God on a number of occasions. The most eventful was when He received the foundations of the Jewish Faith in the form of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.²⁸ When Jesus was being baptised at the Jordan by John the Baptist, the Spirit of God ‘descended like a dove and alighted on him; and lo, a voice from the heaven saying “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”’²⁹ Again, the angel Gabriel visited Muhammad, as He prayed in the Cave of Hira on Jabal Núr (the Mount of Light’) overlooking Mecca. The Báb’s declaration that he was a Messenger of God followed a number of visionary dreams ‘in one of the most dramatic of which he saw the severed head of the Imam Husayn.’ The Imam Husayn had been killed about the end of the eighth century CE and his death was a terrible blow to Shí’ih Islam, of which the Báb was a member. The Shi’ite Muslims believed that the Twelfth Imam would return from occultation, and the Báb declared that he was this awaited Imam – the Mahdí (the Guided One) – and gradually the Bearer of the new divine revelation. He felt as if the spirit of God had permeated and taken possession of His soul. After the Báb was executed, Bahá’u’lláh, Who was a prominent member of the Bábí community, was imprisoned in the

Siyáh-Chál (Black Pit) in Teheran. It was while He was in chains in the stench of this dungeon that he received a revelation from God. In Bahá'u'lláh's own words:

One night, in a dream, these exalted words were heard on every side: 'Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen. Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety. Ere long will God raise up the treasures of the earth – men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy Name, wherewith God hath revived the hearts of such as have recognized Him.'³⁰

It was also reported that Bahá'u'lláh 'felt that a torrent flowed down from [His] head over [His] body and every limb was set afire.' He then 'recited what no man could bear to hear'. He also saw a sweet-voiced heavenly maiden who informed all in creation that he was the 'Beauty of God' and the power of his sovereignty.³¹

There seems to be a common thread running through the reports detailing the Messengers' call from God. They seemed to Their contemporaries to have been extraordinary people to begin with. They were devoted to religion and were found to be practising it among Their people. The theophanic call or revelation often included intermediaries like an angel, a stranger, a dove or a maiden.

What of the Messengers farther east? Tradition does not tell us how Krishna received His revelation. This may be because it is the Hindu belief that he was the eighth incarnation of Vishnu (the Preserver of the universe). However, Buddha is said to have reached enlightenment, not through any visitation or revelation, but by putting Himself into a trance under a bodhi tree. His enlightenment did not take place in the context of a belief in God, and, indeed, Buddhism neither affirms nor rejects belief in God. Unlike Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Islam and the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, the Buddha did not view His enlightenment in the context of a covenant with God. Indeed, there is the common thread of 'the covenant with God' running through all of the dispensations mentioned, with the exception of Hinduism and Buddhism; it is interesting to note that these two religions do not

contain reports of theophanies in the same way that the other major religions do.

The Concept of Journey

One of the common features in the lives of the Messengers was that on experiencing the revelation from God, they embarked on a journey, either by choice or by force. Abraham, on instructions from God, travelled from Ur to Haran near present-day Syria and then to Canaan. On fleeing Egypt, Moses moved to Midian near Sinai, and then returned to Egypt when told by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Then began the forty-year journey to the Promised Land. Zoroaster at the age of twenty left his parents' house in search of answers and reached enlightenment ten years later. In the case of the ministry of Jesus, if one tracks the progress of the Gospel narrative, one can see that Jesus travelled from his home territory of Galilee to Jerusalem where he was crucified. Muhammad travelled from Mecca in response to severe opposition and journeyed to Medina where His ministry was more successful. Then He led the triumphant march on Mecca in late 629 CE. The Báb in 1841 closed His business and embarked on an extended pilgrimage to the Shí'ih shrines in Iraq where 'his fervent devotion attracted some attention,'³² including that of some individuals who were later to become His disciples. Bahá'u'lláh spent forty years in prison and in exile after His revelation from God in the autumn of 1852. Regarding the Buddha, His escape from the city castle of his father led Him to enlightenment and from there to Benares, near the Ganges, and on to the borders of present-day Nepal.

Allied to this, there is evidence that at some stage on this journey the Messengers spent time in isolation, as a preparation for the task They were to undertake. Moses, after his self-imposed banishment from Egypt, settled in the land of Midian, worked as a shepherd and married the daughter of a priest, Jethro. It was in this isolation that God spoke to him at Mount Sinai and instructed him to lead His people out of Egypt. Also, we are told in the Book of Exodus that the Lord instructed Aaron, the elder brother of Moses, to 'go into the wilderness to meet Moses.'³³ After being baptised, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness as a prelude to his ministry.³⁴ During that time we are told of the temptations facing Him, which may be understood to indicate the choices open to Him: to look after the temporal needs of people or to take the

thornier path and establish a new dispensation. Muhammad often went into the hills to pray and meditate. Likewise Bahá'u'lláh spent two years in the mountainous wilderness of Kurdistan in north-west Iran (1854-56).

The Covenant with God

Among the Messengers from the Middle East – Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh – one frequently reads or hears of the term ‘covenant’ (*brit*). This covenant developed from a mere agreement between tribes in the Old Testament to become an agreement with God. For example, Yahweh (God) makes a covenant with Noah in the Book of Genesis³⁵ whereby He would not bring a deluge again if the people stopped eating blood and engaging in homicide. We are told that to mark the covenant, a sacrifice would be offered to Yahweh. The covenant as it came down through the time of Abraham and Moses is a recurring motif in the Old Testament, but it developed from a pragmatic tribal agreement into a personal relationship between God and His people. It maintains the Israelites’ observance of the Law as instructed by God through Moses at Sinai. The Book of Deuteronomy states: ‘And He [God] declared unto you His covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is the ten commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone.’³⁶ It is also seen by His people as a reason for His anger and when He is seen to punish His people. It is used by the Israelites as a reason why God should help them in times of distress. According to Deuteronomy: ‘Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.’³⁷

Jesus came not to annul the old covenant but to continue the covenant made to Abraham and Moses.³⁸ He came to fulfil the covenant, but the obligations of the old law disappear with the coming of the new, and Jesus’ death exceeds in virtue any means of redemption in the old covenant. Jesus ‘is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.’³⁹ Instead of a sacrificial lamb, Jesus was the Lamb of God, because God ‘so

loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.’⁴⁰

Muhammad subsequently came to confirm previous scriptures, particularly the Semitic ones. God had revealed His Will to the Jews and Christians, but they had disobeyed God’s commandments. The purpose of Muhammad’s dispensation was therefore to bring humankind back to the true religion and to restore man to the covenant with God, which demanded absolute resignation (*islam*) to the will of God. Allah is a righteous God Who passed judgments on the sinner, but He is also a merciful God. Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb confirmed this covenant with God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Son of Bahá’u’lláh and appointed Interpreter of His revelation, summarised this covenantal relationship as follows:

Diffuse the glad-tidings of the Kingdom far and wide to the ears, promulgate the Word of God, and put into practice the advices and covenants of God; that is, arise ye with such qualities and attributes that ye may continually bestow life to the body of the world, and nurse the infants of the universe up to the station of maturity and perfection. Enkindle with all your might in every meeting the light of the love of God, gladden and cheer every heart with the utmost loving-kindness, show forth your love to the strangers just as you show forth to your relations. If a soul is seeking to quarrel, ask ye for reconciliation; if he blame you, praise him; if he give you a deadly poison, bestow ye an all-healing antidote; if he createth death, administer ye eternal life; if he becometh a thorn, change ye into roses and hyacinths. Perchance, through such deeds and words, this darkened world will become illuminated, this terrestrial universe will become transformed into a heavenly realm, and this satanic prison become a divine court; warfare and bloodshed be annihilated, and love and faithfulness hoist the tent of unity upon the apex of the world.⁴¹

Bahá’u’lláh Himself speaks of people having violated the ‘Covenant of God by breaking His commandments, and have turned back on their heels, these have erred grievously in the sight of God, the All-Possessing, the Most High,’⁴² which indicates that

His understanding of the term 'covenant' is continuous with that of previous Messengers.

The concept of covenant as a relationship between God and the human being and the responsibilities of humankind in fulfilling the elements of that covenant emphasise the unity that exists among the Messengers of God. Their lives were given to teaching humanity that it must abide by the laws of that covenant. Moses taught the ten commandments, Jesus taught love for God and one's neighbour, Muhammad enjoined absolute resignation to the will of God, and Bahá'u'lláh taught that we should 'recognise that the precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples.'⁴³ 'In the Word of God,' writes 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'there is still another unity, the oneness of the Manifestations of God, His Holiness Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. This is a unity divine, heavenly, radiant, merciful; the one reality appearing in its successive manifestations.'⁴⁴

The Legacy

When one examines the major civilisations that have endured the test of time, one cannot but be struck by the longevity of those civilisations engendered by religion. Already mentioned was the fact that Abraham was the Founder of the Israelite nation, while Moses was the founder of the Jewish Faith. It is important to note that following the death of Moses, the worship of God had to survive alongside the polytheistic worship of several gods. Judaism survived because the Hebrews looked back to the heritage of Moses. Society also changed as a result of the new Faith. There was a change from nomadic agriculture to settled cultivation in this new, rich land of Canaan. Also because of its location at the cross-roads between Europe and Asia and Africa, there were many invasions which eventually dispersed the Jewish nation in the second century CE.

Christianity also grew from humble beginnings. Starting out as a small group on the eastern fringes of the Roman Empire, it managed to become the state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Ninian Smart offers one reason for this rise: 'The Christian mode of life spread an enlightened and effective morality without getting itself bound to the complex rules which had made the Jewish code so hard to follow in the wider world.'⁴⁵ These

communities were representative of all strands of society, as Christianity became the spiritual authority of the empire. Hospitals, colleges and hostels were erected and the charitable work of the Christian communities reached new dimensions. Even as the Empire itself declined, Christianity rose in importance, spreading to the Germanic nations in the fourth century, the Franks in 500 CE and as far west as Ireland by the fifth century.

By the time that Muhammad had passed away, He had succeeded in uniting the many warring tribes in present-day Saudi Arabia and His armies had reached the Mediterranean in the west and much of the Middle East. In another thirty years, the Muslim armies had conquered the Persian Empire and had reached the Caucasus. Why such an immediate success? Smart offers the following reason: 'The Arab conquerors did not treat their new subjects harshly: their rule appeared preferable to that of the Byzantines and Persians ... The Arabs exacted milder taxes, and Christians and Jews, though prevented from proselytising, were allowed to continue the practices of their religions.'⁴⁶ He goes on to say that the vast majority of the Middle Eastern population became Muslims without compulsion.⁴⁷ Islam also contributed to society in other ways. In its first two centuries, a number of different schools interpreting Islamic Law were established. These schools of Islamic Law led to the creation of solid political and social institutions. Present-day Baghdad became a place of cultural achievements in science, mathematics, astronomy and medicine. Folk literature and the arts entered a glorious age and trade flourished with the East and the West.

Further east saw the rise of Hinduism and Buddhism. Little is known of the immediate effects of Hinduism on the Indian subcontinent. This was because Hinduism is such a varied grouping of different religions. In the case of Buddhism, however, what started as a small movement in northern India had by 270 BCE spread over the whole of northern and central India and later as far as Macedonia, Ceylon and Syria, until it reached China by the first century CE, and Tibet in the seventh century CE. As it spread, it also disappeared from India, due to the upsurge of Hinduism and the merging of the best in Islam and Hinduism within the Sikh religion founded by Guru Nanak (b. 1469). As Buddhism spread, it established monastery cities or *sanghas*, which were places of learning and meditation.

But what have been the effects of the most recent dispensation, the Bahá'í Faith? By 1992, the one hundredth anniversary of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, the Faith had been established in 205 countries, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica Book of that year, making it second to Christianity as the most widespread religion. Due to the importance that the Bahá'í Faith places on world unity, Bahá'ís have become influential in committees of the United Nations, especially its non-governmental agencies. It is interesting to note that the principles of the Faith – the oneness of humanity, the equality of men and women, universal education, religious tolerance, a world commonwealth of nations, an international auxiliary language – all of which were unheard of or not properly grasped during the time of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry – are now taken for granted to be the basis of all civilisation, and every country's constitution in the free world contains these principles. Thus it can be said that in its one hundred and fifty years, the Bahá'í Faith is progressing in much the same direction as the other major religions before it.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the lives of the Founders of the main religious movements – Abraham, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. These Messengers are by no means unique, as there may have been others Who founded religious movements and Whose Names and influence have disappeared with the passage of time. What this paper has tried to show is that these great Luminaries of God manifested common traits – a youthful wisdom beyond Their years coupled with a strong sense of religious devotion; a calling from God which set Them on a journey which often brought severe persecution for Them and Their followers. Their teachings emphasised a reaching out to God, a relationship with the one true God, or in the case of Buddhism, the search for spiritual enlightenment and detachment from earthly cravings. That relationship with God or that enlightenment was then to be a springboard for how one interacted with one's fellow human beings. With the passing of the Messenger, the Faith invariably grew and with the increase in numbers, a change took place in the world with the tremendous efflorescence in learning and in the construction of ethically based civilisations.

These Messengers came at times of upheaval, when the civilisation that had been inspired by the previous Messenger was in decline. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that these Messengers of God are periodically sent to renew our relationship with God. As we evolve and develop, the Messenger develops our individual and collective relationship with God; this relationship is always commensurate with our stage of development. In examining the similarities of Their lives and the creation of great civilisations as a direct consequence of Their coming and Their teachings, it has been shown that God's revelation to the human race has been progressive – bringing humanity by the hand and leading all of its members to a greater understanding of our role in God's plan.

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34. Matthew 4:1-11.
35. Genesis 4 :18.
36. Deuteronomy 4:13.
37. *Ibid.* 7:9.
38. Letter of St Paul to the Galatians, Chapter 3, vs. 15 ff., New Testament.
39. Letter of St Paul to the Hebrews, Chapter 9, v. 15, New Testament.
40. John 3:16.
41. 'Abdu'l-Bahá *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 353
42. Bahá'u'lláh *Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 11
43. Bahá'u'lláh *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 21.
44. 'Abdu'l-Bahá *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 67
45. Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 436.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 499.
47. *Qur'án* 10:99-100.