

# **The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* as a Lens with which to Examine some of the Dilemmas of Modernity by Betsy Omidvaran**

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to experiment with setting up a dialogue between, on the one hand, the Most Holy Book of the Bahá'í Dispensation, the ultimate source of the laws and principles on which future society will be based and, on the other, some of the issues and principles that arise in an intellectual analysis of the modern world as it had evolved up to the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the Book first appeared. The first part starts from some of these latter principles, that is, the role of religion, the importance of reason and education, the development of nationalism, the notion of freedom and the rise of democracy. The second part looks afresh at the Most Holy Book and some relevant principles that are not among those mentioned above, such as Houses of Worship, universal language, financial principles, justice, the Covenant and unity.*

## **Introduction**

This is a work-in-progress for which I have a two-item agenda. The first is to set up a dialogue between the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Most Holy Book of the Bahá'í Revelation, and the general discussion of modernity around the time it was written, in order to find insights about them both. The second is to defend the centrality of religion to human progress. Even though the general discussion on modernity has continued to the present day, I will limit my discussion to the period from 1873 up to the end of the Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Faith in 1921. I am taking no position on post-modernity, which, if it exists, began after this period, and am assuming that some elements that postmodernist theorists identify were at least beginning to manifest themselves earlier in the modern age.

Although there are many definitions for modernity, I am defining it in my own way. Modernity as a term refers by its nature to the period contemporaneous with the person using it. It can be used at any time to refer to some current period as opposed to some past period. The year 1873, when the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* was revealed, was modern compared to 1773, which in turn was modern compared to 1673. Modernity at its simplest and clearest can be defined as the specific way in which one period is different from another. This implies an overall view of history as constant progress rather than a repeating cycle, which is in general the Bahá'í view.

Often the later eighteenth century is identified as the time modernity began in earnest, although it can easily be traced back to the fifteenth or sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Two major factors are the developments in philosophy emerging from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in Europe, combined with the development of science, technology and mechanisation. The French Revolution is often seen to be a defining moment. As I am using this debate largely as a foil for setting up my dialogue with the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and especially as I am concentrating on literature coming from a Middle Eastern context, where modernity is often seen to begin in earnest with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, I will accept these premises for my purpose here.

I propose to look at a few issues plucked from the rather vigorous available treatments of the notion of modernity and the process of modernisation. There is a huge literature on modernity and within this literature can be found almost any point of view, identifying a wide variety of starting points, causes and major features. I will use these issues, which have been chosen by arbitrary means, as a springboard to a dialogue with the insights and standards established by the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. I will also present a starting contribution based on the perspective of the *Aqdas* and will also include some passages from *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, which supplements and elaborates on the laws and principles

of the former Book. The result will be the beginning of a coherent position which takes insights from them both and a set of questions raised by the virtual process of consultation between them.

### **Themes pertaining to Modernity**

It is generally agreed that the Most Holy Book was revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the year 1873, although other possible dates have been discussed. The Book is very short, but it contains in embryo all the broadest and most important principles of the Bahá'í Revelation. The Bahá'í Faith by its definition is modern, having come into being in the nineteenth century, and the Most Holy Book itself is the standard, the balance by which humanity's immediate future course from 1873 was to be determined:

Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it. (K99)<sup>1</sup>

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is not a response or direct contribution to the societal dialogue on modernity in the same way as was *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá two years later to the people of Iran. It is written to an infinite variety of audiences simultaneously – not only the people of that period in history, including the Bábís, the Bahá'ís, the Muslims and all of humanity, but the same variety of people in our time as well as the people of the latter part of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh. What I want to look at here is how it was and is addressing the generality of humanity, in 1873 and the four to five decades after 1873. This means all of humanity, encompassing everyone, not just those who believe

in Bahá'u'lláh's station and Revelation: "The sincere among His servants will regard the precepts set forth by God as the Water of Life to the followers of every faith, and the Lamp of wisdom and loving providence to all the denizens of earth and heaven." (K29) The same point is made in the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh with regard to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* itself: "So vast is its range that it hath encompassed all men ere their recognition of it."<sup>2</sup>

This is a very broad subject and, by its nature, I will only be able to make a beginning. While having looked at some other attempts to address these issues in a Bahá'í context, I will focus on the insights to be gained from the Most Holy Book itself. In one way, modernity encompasses everything in the world – and probably has at some point in someone's writings.

I started by identifying some key elements of modernity, derived from my own perceptions and from some of the literature, particularly that which addresses the Islamic response to "modernity." This has to a degree come to them from the West in a certain form and packaged together with colonialism and oppression. Other literature on modernity would perforce raise other issues. These elements include the following:

- the role and influence of religion in society;
- the role of individualism and the notion of freedom;
- the rise of democracy and the decline of hereditary elites;
- the emergence of nationalism;
- the reliance on human reason and science, mass education and literacy.

With these factors in mind, I looked through the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, noting down passages which are relevant to the elements I had pre-selected, and the results are discussed below.

The first and most important issue is the role and influence of religion in society. One of the main factors

identified in literature about modern history is the loosening of the ties of religion within society. Before the Reformation, large areas of Europe were Roman Catholic, and it was considered that all the subjects of a king should be of one religion. The advent of the Protestant denominations at first strengthened the role and importance of religion, but by introducing personal options and a concept of individual choice, societal constraints were loosened. The French Revolution, at the end of the eighteenth century, abolished religion altogether, but in the end established its own. A large number of factors tended to undermine belief in and dependence on religion. These included the separation of Church and State, the advance of science and opposition to it by the Church, the supreme value placed on reason, the advance in material well-being, the exposure to other cultures which led people to question their own traditions and the rise of alternative ideologies, including social sciences such as psychology and sociology, that assumed many of religion's roles and aimed at understanding mechanisms within individuals and society that constrain behaviour and uphold moral values.

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, like the Bahá'í Faith in general, upholds religion as the central and necessary pillar of society, and this is its major theme. The notion of religion and its importance pervades the book, but I have chosen a few passages which shed particular light on this notion, starting with the first two paragraphs. The opening paragraph contains the twin inseparable duties, directed at individuals, of "recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws" and the observance of "every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world." (K1) This reaffirms the place of religion in the lives of individuals. Modern thought often accepts religion in the realm of the individual, but questions its role in society.

The second paragraph of the *Aqdas* starts with the social implications of religious belief: "They whom God hath endued

with insight will readily recognize 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.” (K2) This states briefly and clearly the main principle which is developed more fully in the Tablets. It specifies not only that religion is important to society but that it is the most important way to security. In the ninth *Ishráq*, Bahá’u’lláh repeats this superlative, using the term “religion,” in relation to the establishment of unity, the source of other social virtues which are then specified:

The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God's holy Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife. The religion of God and His divine law are the most potent instruments and the surest of all means for the dawning of the light of unity amongst men. The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquillity of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God.<sup>3</sup>

In the first *Ishráq*, He explains further, and enumerates the inevitable consequences of ignoring religion: “In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God impelleth man to hold fast to that which is good, and shun all evil. Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine. Unto this will bear witness every man of true understanding.”<sup>4</sup> And on the second leaf of the Most Exalted Paradise:

Religion is verily the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world and of tranquillity amongst its peoples. The weakening of the pillars of

religion hath strengthened the foolish and emboldened them and made them more arrogant.<sup>5</sup>

These passages identify a number of different roles of religion in society, that is: the stronghold for the protection of peoples and the stronghold for their welfare; motivating good and discouraging evil; establishing unity and concord; and establishing order. Without religion, there is inevitably chaos and confusion and loss of fairness, justice, tranquillity and peace.

The second element I chose was the role of individualism and the notion of freedom. The desire for and pursuit of freedom has been a dominant theme of modern history. This has been expressed in political mottoes and statements, philosophical theories and in the economic system. An increasingly complex society gave rise to greater potential for individual choice, and increasing education and literacy made people aware of increasing options and better able to take them.

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* contains quite a strong statement on the pitfalls of liberty. At first glance, it seems to totally condemn liberty of any kind and could even be seen to be advocating an authoritarian society: “We find some men desiring liberty, and priding themselves therein. Such men are in the depths of ignorance. Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench. Thus warneth you He Who is the Reckoner, the All-Knowing.” (K122–23) The exhortation continues, maintaining this strong clarity throughout. Bahá’u’lláh is speaking to a world which is savouring the experience of freedom from previous restraint, and which has identified freedom as a fundamental right and goal, often even as the main prescription for prosperity and progress. He states that this over-enthusiasm for freedom is a fatal flaw which will corrode the social fabric:

That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief-maker. Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness ... True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty.” (K123–25)

Thus humans must submit to such restraints as will protect and guard them and must realise their own ignorance in relation to God’s wisdom. In certain circumstances it is appropriate, and in others it is not. And what legitimate limitation there is on liberty is from God, not from the various oppressors of the past, from which people are celebrating their freedom. A large part of all of these texts of the *Aqdas* is devoted to outlining what these salubrious restraints are. The Arabic word used in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is *hurriya*.

There are several passages in the Tablets which deal with this subject. In the *Lawh-i-Dunyá*, Bahá’u’lláh states: “Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty.”<sup>6</sup> This echoes the meaning it has in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and, because the Tablet is in Persian, the words for “true liberty” are *ázádí haqíqí*. Earlier in the same Tablet the same word is used: “Thou must show forth that which will ensure the peace and the well-being of the miserable and the downtrodden. Gird up the loins of thine endeavour, that perchance thou mayest release the captive from his chains, and enable him to attain true liberty [*ázádí* alone].”<sup>7</sup> This seems to be a different meaning, made even more clear by subsequent passages about justice and oppression.



This may be one of the circumstances in which liberty is approved.

In another passage in the Tablets, the *Lawh-i-Maqsúd*, Bahá'u'lláh says: “It is incumbent upon them who are in authority to exercise moderation in all things. Whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial influence. Consider for instance such things as liberty [*hurriyat*], civilization and the like. However much men of understanding may favourably regard them, they will, if carried to excess, exercise a pernicious influence upon men.”<sup>8</sup> This seems to be saying that liberty, like civilisation, which is regarded as something positive, exerts a beneficial influence unless it is not exercised in moderation. It is when carried to excess that it is pernicious.

A related matter is democracy, an expression of freedom, and the accompanying decline of hereditary and other kinds of elites, who were often the oppressors of the past. Before the modern period, society and government were in the hands of the royalty and nobility, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this was changing. The individual had an increasing voice in his own life and in the running of society, and the onward march of democracy is a defining feature of modern history. Democracy is a more complex concept than just elections and government by the people, but this is its most basic meaning.

There are several references in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* of relevance to this subject. The first is the outline of the most fundamental unit of the Bahá'í system of governance, the local House of Justice: “The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá ... It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly.” (K30) This verse does not specify that these are elected institutions, by universal adult suffrage, but we now

know that they are. It does specify their taking counsel together, which is also an implication of democracy. Thus, the heart of the Bahá'í administration, the pattern of the future, is essentially democratic.

In two passages Bahá'u'lláh refers to democratic institutions. Speaking of Tihran, He states: "Erelong will the state of affairs within thee be changed, and the reins of power fall into the hands of the people ... Rest assured in the gracious favour of thy Lord." (K93) Here He is describing and predicting change to democracy, without commenting on whether it is desirable. In fact, earlier He mentions a different turn of events, saying that God will, if it is His Will, "bless Tihran's throne with one who will rule with justice." (K91) In speaking of the importance of a universal language, He addresses the "members of the parliaments throughout the world" (K189), implicitly legitimising them by giving them instructions. It would be interesting to do a survey of what parliaments (*majalis*) there were in 1873.

In another passage, however, Bahá'u'lláh states: "None must contend with those who wield authority over the people; leave unto them that which is theirs, and direct your attention to men's hearts." (K95) This may at first seem to mitigate the approval of the democratic approach, but it does not specify the form of the government it is referring to and how it was constituted.

The *Aqdas* is full of exhortations to the kings of the world, warning them against oppression and exhorting them to recognise His station. In an address to the kings of the world, He says: "Arise and serve Him Who is the Desire of all nations Who hath created you through a word from Him, and ordained you to be, for all time, the emblems of His sovereignty." (K82) The balance is made clear in *Bishárát* regarding republican government and the majesty of kingship: "Although a republican form of government profiteth all the peoples of the world, yet the majesty of kingship is one of the signs of God. We do not wish that the countries of the world should remain

deprived thereof. If the sagacious combine the two forms into one, great will be their reward in the presence of God.”<sup>9</sup>

Nationalism is an aspect of modernity that developed in parallel with other aspects. While much has been written on the subject, a precise definition is elusive, as the phenomenon varies markedly between different “nations.” There is nothing in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* that I have identified that specifically addresses the question of nations and nationalism, as there are with my other elements. Many theorists identify a change in nationalism in the 1880s or at least a new variety of it alongside the older variety. The latter kind is often called “integral nationalism” and is based on the survival of the fittest; its paradigm was Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. The former kind is called by a variety of names. Historian Eric Hobsbawm says that among these theorists there was a “constant assumption of nations as ‘second best to world unity.’”<sup>10</sup> Building of nations was part of a natural process of expansion – family to tribe to region to nation to globe. This is interesting from a Bahá’í perspective, as this change was happening at the very time Bahá’u’lláh was prescribing the next step to world unity, a time when this step was natural and clear.

There is a passage in the *Aqdas* that mentions countries, recognising their existence but not specifying a role of special value for them. “Promote ye the development of the cities of God and His countries [*biladihi*], and glorify Him therein in the joyous accents of His well-favoured ones.” (K160)<sup>11</sup> The general Bahá’í concept of transcending the limitation of nations is expressed in the sixth *Ishráq*: “Let not man glory in this that he loveth his country, let him rather glory in this that he loveth his kind.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the more commonly identified elements central to the development of modernity is the reliance on human reason and the advancement of science, education and literacy. This is a subject addressed in the *Aqdas*: “We have permitted you to read such sciences as are profitable unto you, not such as end in idle disputation; better is this for you, if ye be of them that

comprehend.” (K77) Because this development has often been opposed by established religions, there is a sense in modern thought that reason and science are opposed to religion.

And further: “The third Tajallí: is concerning arts, crafts and sciences. Knowledge is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth, and not those which begin with words and end with words. Great indeed is the claim of scientists and craftsmen on the peoples of the world.”<sup>13</sup>

An interesting passage from this standpoint is the following injunction: “On the appearance of fearful natural events call ye to mind the might and majesty of your Lord, He Who heareth and seeth all, and say ‘Dominion is God’s, the Lord of the seen and the unseen, the Lord of creation.’” (K11) One of the characteristics of modernity is that science has largely explained the natural events which struck fear into the peoples of past ages, and one of the reasons for the decline of religious belief is that science has largely replaced religion in offering satisfactory explanations for such events. This provision none the less acknowledges that religion still has a part to play in helping humanity to deal with “fearful natural events”.

Regarding literacy, this is related to a particular technological development, the printing press, which could be regarded as the quintessential symbol of modernity, without which our modernity would be considerably different. In the last half of the nineteenth century, education, literacy, and the publication of newspapers and books were increasing throughout Europe, North America and the Middle East. We find the following in the *Aqdas*, indicating the importance of literacy and education: “Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing and in all that hath been laid down in the Holy Tablet. He that putteth away that which is commanded unto him, the Trustees [of the House of Justice] are then to take from him

that which is required for their instruction if he be wealthy and, if not, the matter devolveth upon the House of Justice.” (K48)

There are also relevant passages in the Tablets, for example, the fourth principle of the *Lawh-i-Dunyá*: “Everyone, whether man or woman, should hand over to a trusted person a portion of what he or she earneth through trade, agriculture or other occupation, for the training and education of children ...”<sup>14</sup>

In the sixth *Taráz*, Bahá’u’lláh says:

Knowledge is one of the wondrous gifts of God. It is incumbent upon everyone to acquire it. Such arts and material means as are now manifest have been achieved by virtue of His knowledge and wisdom which have been revealed in Epistles and Tablets through His Most Exalted Pen – a Pen out of whose treasury pearls of wisdom and utterance and the arts and crafts of the world are brought to light. In this Day the secrets of the earth are laid bare before the eyes of men. The pages of swiftly-appearing newspapers are indeed the mirror of the world. They reflect the deeds and the pursuits of divers peoples and kindreds. They both reflect them and make them known. They are a mirror endowed with hearing, sight and speech. This is an amazing and potent phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

### **Six Further Themes**

I will now mention some passages that seem to me to be relevant to a discussion of modernity, but are not prominent in the ongoing societal dialogue and thus did not arise in the foregoing. These may be the most interesting of all. The remainder of the paper will consider the dialogue from the other side, looking at the *Aqdas* with fresh eyes, to consider its vision of modernity, looking at modernity without reference to the theorists. These are:

- Houses of Worship;
- a universal language;
- financial arrangements and the economic situation;
- justice;
- the Covenant;
- unity.

One point is the creation of Houses of Worship. “O people of the world! Build ye houses of worship throughout the lands in the name of Him Who is the Lord of all religions. Make them as perfect as is possible in the world of being, and adorn them with that which befitteth them, not with images and effigies. Then, with radiance and joy, celebrate therein the praise of your Lord, the Most Compassionate. Verily, by His remembrance the eye is cheered and the heart is filled with light.” (K31) The primary purpose of these Houses of Worship is the worship of God, which will be the centre of any future prosperous and peaceful society. Also, we now know that these Houses of Worship will be the centre of a whole network of social, economic and cultural institutions. These will assume a central place in the establishment and support of a peaceful, prosperous, fulfilling and modern society.

Another key prescription is the universal language, which is given extraordinary precedence: “O members of parliaments throughout the world! Select ye a single language for the use of all on earth, and adopt ye likewise a common script. God, verily, maketh plain for you that which shall profit you and enable you to be independent of others. He, of a truth, is the Most Bountiful, the All-Knowing, the All-Informed. This will be the cause of unity, could ye but comprehend it, and the greatest instrument for promoting harmony and civilization, would that ye might understand!” (K189)

This injunction is developed further in subsequent Tablets. In the third Glad-Tidings, Bahá'u'lláh states: “It behoveth the sovereigns of the world – may God assist them –

or the ministers of the earth to take counsel together and to adopt one of the existing languages or a new one to be taught to children in schools throughout the world, and likewise one script. Thus the whole earth will come to be regarded as one country.”<sup>16</sup>

In the sixth *Ishrâq*, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the purpose is unity and mentions that He has enjoined the same task of choosing one language and script on the House of Justice. “The sixth *Ishrâq* is union and concord amongst the children of men. From the beginning of time the light of unity hath shed its divine radiance upon the world, and the greatest means for the promotion of that unity is for the peoples of the world to understand one another’s writing and speech.”<sup>17</sup>

There are a number of provisions in the *Aqdas* regarding financial arrangements and the economic situation. There are several sources of funds for the future institutions, and they began to be applied to Bahá'ís early in Bahá'í history, but not to the generality of humanity:

Should anyone acquire one hundred mithqáls of gold, nineteen mithqáls thereof are God’s and to be rendered unto Him, the Fashioner of earth and heaven ... Say: By this means He hath desired to purify what ye possess and to enable you to draw nigh unto such stations as none can comprehend save those whom God hath willed. (K97)

It hath been enjoined upon you to purify your means of sustenance and other such things through payment of Zakát. (K146)

Although everyone is enjoined to make a will, in which they can leave their possessions in any way they choose, there is substantial detail on what will happen in cases of intestacy (see K20–28). Shoghi Effendi has explained that a crucial principle is that wealth should be spread widely and that its social utility should be paramount.<sup>18</sup> This is interesting from the standpoint

of the first part of this paper because the accumulation of capital is identified as a crucial factor in modernity, enabling industrialisation and investment in large projects. (K20ff)

Another important aspect of the economic situation is the role of work, which is specified very clearly: “O people of Bahá! It is incumbent upon each one of you to engage in some occupation – such as a craft, a trade or the like. We have exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship of the one true God. Reflect, O people, on the grace and blessings of your Lord, and yield Him thanks at eventide and dawn. Waste not your hours in idleness and sloth, but occupy yourselves with what will profit you and others.” (K33)

Another recurring theme is justice. There is a clear prohibition of slavery, which was (and is) still common. “It is forbidden you to trade in slaves, be they men or women. It is not for him who is himself a servant to buy another of God’s servants, and this hath been prohibited in His Holy Tablet.” (K72)

In the eighth *Ishráq*, which is accounted as part of the *Aqdas*, Bahá’u’lláh states: “O people of God! That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment. These two pillars are the sources of life to the world. Inasmuch as for each day there is a new problem and for every problem an expedient solution, such affairs should be referred to the House of Justice that the members thereof may act according to the needs and requirements of the time.”<sup>19</sup>

In an apostrophe to the “Rulers of America and the Presidents of the Republics therein”, He gives them specific instructions concerning justice: “Adorn ye the temple of dominion with the ornament of justice and of the fear of God, and its head with the crown of the remembrance of your Lord, the Creator of the heavens ... O concourse of rulers! Give ear unto that which hath been raised from the Dayspring of Grandeur: ‘Verily, there is none other God but Me, the Lord of Utterance, the All-Knowing.’ Bind ye the broken with the



hands of justice, and crush the oppressor who flourisheth with the rod of the commandments of your Lord, the Ordainer, the All-Wise.” (K88)

Because the assumption of the *Aqdas* is that the Bahá’í social structure is the kernel of future global civilisation and applies to everyone even now, a clear Covenant is crucial for maintaining the integrity of its world-unifying system. “When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.” (K121) “O people of the world! When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.” (K174)

The concept of unity is mentioned in a number of contexts, including, as mentioned above, the purpose of the universal language and the very purpose of religion. This is specified in connection with other religions: “Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God. Beware lest amidst men the flame of foolish ignorance overpower you. All things proceed from God and unto Him they return. He is the source of all things and in Him all things are ended.” (K144)

In the second *Taráz*, this is broadened to refer to all peoples: “They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper is but one way of looking at this short but multifaceted Book. There are infinite ways of looking at the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and gaining different kinds of insights from it.

Each attempt should be done with the aim of expanding our vision of it, not limiting it in any way. I have tried to make sure that my understanding flowed from the text itself as much as possible and not from my previous conceptions and inclinations. I also had my own agenda of wanting to understand something more of modernity at the end of the nineteenth century. The paper has hopefully fulfilled its purpose of laying a solid foundation on the basis of which future explorations of the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and modernity can be made.

### References

1. References to the text of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* will be indicated in this pattern, that is, in brackets following a quotation, the letter “K” followed by the number of the paragraph.
2. Shoghi Effendi’s summary of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 18, quoted from Bahá'u'lláh in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 200.
3. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 129–30.
4. *Ibid*, p. 125.
5. *Ibid*, p. 63–4.
6. *Ibid*, p. 89.
7. *Ibid*, p. 84.
8. *Ibid*, p. 169.
9. *Ibid*, p. 28.
10. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, p. 25.
11. Also, urbanisation is identified as a central part of the societal dialogue on modernity but not one of the ones I chose.
12. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 128.
13. *Ibid*, pp. 51–52.
14. *Ibid*, p. 90.
15. *Ibid*, p. 39–40.
16. *Ibid*, p. 22.

17. Ibid, pp. 127–28.
18. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa, Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), notes, p. 184.
19. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 128–29.
20. Ibid, pp. 35–36.