



VOLUME 2

# SOLAS

A PUBLICATION OF THE  
ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES  
*English-speaking Europe: Irish Edition*  
2002

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– A Dialogue*

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# **The Roman Catholic Priesthood and Bahá'í Administration – A Dialogue by Kevin Brogan**

## **Abstract**

*One of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith is that in this dispensation there is no longer a need for a professional priesthood. One might therefore ask how there could be any reason to deal with the issue of Roman Catholic Priesthood in the context of Bahá'í Administration. This paper examines the three elements of Roman Catholic Priesthood – Leadership, Teaching and Sacrament – in an effort to explain to Bahá'ís the theology of Priesthood and to demonstrate to Roman Catholics how many of the functions pertaining to the role of priests are being fulfilled in Bahá'í Administration. This issue is pertinent, considering the level of criticism of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy in recent years. There is a lot of misunderstanding surrounding the meaning of priesthood, and the paper sets out to answer the need for a greater understanding of workings of the Roman Catholic Administration.*

## **Introduction**

Growing up in the Irish Roman Catholic tradition, one cannot forget the hierarchical influence of the local priest in the Church. The true meaning of Church as the 'People of God' is often lost on many Roman Catholics, and many would say that this is due to the influence of a Hierarchy which is seen to impose its teaching on the laity. The priest, "acting in 'persona Christi,' feeds the flock, the people of God, and leads them to sanctity."<sup>1</sup> How is that role played out in the parish? The Roman Catholic doctrinal tradition describes the priest as teacher of the Word (Scripture), minister of the Sacraments and leader of the Christian community entrusted to him (his parish). In the context of the Bahá'í Faith, the priest performs the functions of both the appointed arm and the elected arm.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to examine each of these three priestly functions – teacher, minister of Sacraments and leader<sup>2</sup> – and how the role of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy contrasts with the leadership model evident in the Bahá'í Faith.

One might question the relevance of such a study as Bahá'u'lláh has told us that in this Dispensation there is no need for priesthood, as it exists in Christian religious denominations. This, however, does not diminish the relevance of such a comparison between the leadership model of the Bahá'í Faith and that of Roman Catholicism. The relevance of such a study is that it sets out to enable Roman Catholics to understand the reasoning for not having a priesthood while at the same time allowing Bahá'ís to understand the theology behind Roman Catholic priesthood.

### **The Church Hierarchy and its Teaching Role in the Christian Community**

The missionary activity of the Roman Catholic Church – or pioneering, as it applies to the Bahá'í Faith – is “incumbent primarily on the College of Bishops presided over by its head, the Successor of Peter”<sup>3</sup>, while the “priests ... are collaborators with the Bishop in virtue of the Sacrament of Orders, and are called to share responsibility for the mission.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, the Church Hierarchy holds the ultimate responsibility for spreading the Word of God, a role which in the Bahá'í Faith is the challenge facing each believer. However, lay teachers are also employed to carry out this task, but in all cases under the auspices of the local priest or bishop. This authority is given to the priest by virtue of his sacred ordination.<sup>5</sup> This is not meant to be an issue of power. This monopolisation of the teaching of the Word of God stems from the belief that the priest in his parish has a theological training and knowledge which is greater than that of the laity.

The argument may be put forward, as it is in the Bahá'í Faith, that people have benefited from the advances of

widespread education, which challenges them to seek after truth. However, it remains the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that the priest is the primary teacher of his flock. This is despite the fact that lay people now have sufficient education to be able to make informed decisions about interpreting how the teachings of Jesus can influence their individual lives. In the Bahá'í Faith, the believers are encouraged to read the writings and reflect on how they can lead them to God: “Man should know his own self and recognise that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty.”<sup>6</sup> One must earnestly seek after truth with a pure heart and a mind free of prejudice.

Therefore, as a Roman Catholic, one is expected to follow the teachings of Christ as recorded in the New Testament and interpreted by the Hierarchy as well as the teachings from suitable books<sup>7</sup> and “approved writers in theology”<sup>8</sup>, while also adhering to the teachings of the Vatican as they have evolved over the last two thousand years. The authority for such teaching lies in the hands of the Pope and his College of Bishops, which constitutes an infallible authority because they are direct successors to the apostles and the Pope is a direct descendant of St Peter, the first Pope. It is interesting to note that the doctrine on Papal Infallibility was not drafted until 1869 and in response to the unification of Italy where Papal authority was confined to the present-day Vatican; according to Cardinal Manning of England, at the time, “European powers are dissolving the temporal power of the Vicar of Christ.” This Papal primacy, or infallibility, means that the Pope, when teaching matters of faith or morals for all the faithful, cannot err and is to be obeyed.

It might be said that the absence of a professional clergy in the Bahá'í Faith poses a greater challenge for the individual believer. In Roman Catholicism, the individual has been encouraged to rely on the Hierarchy to teach, although there has been some effort to involve laity in this task because of the fall-off in vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

However, each individual Bahá'í is encouraged to participate in teaching the faith: “It is the individual who manifests the vitality of the Faith upon which the success of the teaching work and the development of the community depends.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The Priest as Leader in his Parish**

The administrative structure described above has served the Church of Rome quite well throughout its history, even if there is less loyalty to it in today's society. Because it was necessary to protect the faith from heresies and to maintain the purity of the teachings, such a leadership was centralised, with authority and power resting in the hands of a small group of individuals headed by one person who was seen as “Christ's Vicar” on earth. Such a leadership – called the Church Magisterium – had to be authoritarian and to “preserve God's people from deviations and deflections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error.”<sup>10</sup> Out of this need grew a professional clergy, which served the faithful and who were largely uneducated and needed to be told what was right and wrong, what was sinful and what was not, what was Church teaching and what was heresy. The Pope is still seen to be the “perpetual and visible source and the foundation of unity both of the bishops and of the whole community of the faithful.”<sup>11</sup> As Vicar of Christ and as “pastor of the entire church, he has full supreme and universal power over the whole church, a power he can always exercise unhindered.”<sup>12</sup> Likewise, when Christ appointed Simon Peter as the head of the Church (Matthew 16:18–19), He also, by extension, appointed the Apostles to work with Peter to lead the Church. Today the bishops of the Church live in “communion with one another and with the Roman Pontiff in a bond of unity, charity and peace ... Together with their head the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him, they have supreme power and authority over the Universal Church.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to this, the individual bishops in their own dioceses “exercise their pastoral office over the portion of the People of God assigned

to them”<sup>14</sup>, while at the same time have consideration for the needs of the whole Church as part of their participation in the College of Cardinals. The bishop is the authentic teacher of the faith in his diocese, and exercises power in accordance with the whole Church under the guidance of the Pope. For example, it is Church teaching that the bishop is the primary religious education teacher of all Roman Catholic children in his diocese. He rules with the same authority and sacred power in his diocese as the Pope rules the whole Church. Likewise the priest in his parish has the same power and authority as the bishop has in the diocese.

Such an infallibility also exists with the Bahá’í Universal House of Justice<sup>15</sup>; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that the members of the Universal House of Justice “have not, individually, essential infallibility: but the body of the House of Justice is under the protection and the unerring guidance of God: this is called conferred infallibility.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise the Spiritual Assemblies – both at national and local level – set out to “dispel all the doubts, misunderstandings and harmful differences which may arise in the community of believers.”<sup>17</sup> In the same way that the bishop has complete authority in his diocese and the priest has similar authority in his parish, it can be said that the National Spiritual Assembly and the Local Spiritual Assembly have authority when they meet and make decisions.

However, one major difference exists in that National and Local Assemblies and, indeed, the Universal House of Justice are elected authorities. A convention takes place each year at national level where delegates appointed by the believers in each local community meet to consult on issues pertaining to the believers under the jurisdiction of the National Assembly, while the members of the Universal House of Justice are elected for five-year terms. Bahá’ís are encouraged to inform their Local Assemblies of issues concerning the local community, and the members of the Local Assemblies consult on these issues. Such a process is not as strong within the Roman Catholic parish. Within the Catholic Church, priests

and bishops are appointed and the faithful have no vote or say on their appointment. Likewise each parish is expected to have a parish council made up of the faithful who meet to discuss issues concerning the parish:

The individual layman, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which he may employ is permitted and sometimes even obliged to express his opinion on things which concern the good of the Church. When occasion arise, let this be done through the agencies set up by the Church for this purpose. Let it always be done in truth, in courage, and in prudence, with reverence and charity towards those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

However, lay involvement is organised by the local priest and the laity can offer opinion which will support the priest in his threefold mission of teaching God's word, sanctifying others by his gift of sacrament and sacrifice and leading others to God's promise of eternal life. But this body is not legislative and cannot make policy or issue decrees. It is a consultative body, whereby the priest consults with the faithful and yet has the final decision. By the authority vested in him in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, he decides what should be done. The parish council does not therefore administer the parish: its role is to help the priest in his leadership role, advising him on the needs of the parish while affirming his indispensable office as the laity's mediator with God and his tangible link with his bishop and the rest of the Church. Many would say that because this authority is vested in one individual who is not elected by the faithful and is often a stranger, such an authority lacks credibility. Indeed, in light of the recent allegations and exposure of the sexual abuse of children and young people perpetrated by priests in Ireland and North America, this authority has been significantly eroded.



The leadership of the Roman Catholic Church operates a hierarchical model of administration, with the Pope having supreme power and authority and jurisdiction over all the Church. While the Bahá'í Administration in the form of the Universal House of Justice, along with National and Local Assemblies, has the same power and authority, it is an elected authority made up of believers “representative of the choicest and most varied and capable elements in every Bahá'í community.”<sup>19</sup> It is important to point out that there is also an appointed arm of Bahá'í Administration. This institution is the International Teaching Centre (established in 1973), which is given the task of promoting the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith and defending it against external and internal attack. The International Teaching Centre is based in Haifa in Israel, and it supervises Continental Boards of Counsellors, whose responsibility is to promote and defend the Faith in their respective continents. Counsellors are appointed for a five-year term. They in turn appoint Auxiliary Boards for Protection and Propagation in each of the countries, who in turn appoint assistants to help them. The Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members and their assistants “are responsible for stimulating, counselling and assisting National Spiritual Assemblies and work with individuals, groups and Local Assemblies.”<sup>20</sup> While the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board Members outrank the National and Local Assemblies, they do not interfere in the conduct and administering of Assemblies' plans. Therefore the elected administration in the form of the Assemblies has autonomy to deal with the issues pertaining to their communities. Unlike the parish council in the Roman Catholic tradition, which is established to advise the priest, the National and Local Spiritual Assemblies are actively involved in serving the needs of their respective communities. Both the appointed arm and the elected arm of the Bahá'í Faith operate out of a servant model of leadership, where “the functions, procedures between the agencies of the Bahá'í Administration are meant to canalise, not obstruct the work of the Cause ... these aspects of

the administration will properly be viewed in the context of humble service to the Blessed Perfection [Bahá'u'lláh], which is the loftiest objective of all who are gathered under the banner of the Most Great Name.”<sup>21</sup> This approach challenges the believer to play an active part in his or her Faith, whereas in Roman Catholicism the faith of the people depends on the structures rather than on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and on one's ability to make an informed decision having read the Scriptures. By virtue of the conferral of Holy Orders, the Pope, bishops and priests have the sole right to speak in Christ's name officially, while the part played by the laity is limited to an advisory capacity and to be consulted when the need arises.

### **The Sacramental Ministry of Priesthood**

The Bahá'í administrative system is not an ecclesiastical one, as already mentioned. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh tells priests to leave their ministries: “O concourse of priests! Leave the bells, and come forth, then, from your churches.”<sup>22</sup> It is the Bahá'í belief that a sacramental theology as taught by the Catholic Church had its importance in history and that there is now no need for such rituals to help the faithful adhere to their faith. This includes the sacrament of Holy Orders, which is taken by the priest and gives him the power to lead his flock. In turn the priest is the chief celebrant for the other six sacraments – Baptism, Penance, Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, and the Sacrament of the Sick (Extreme Unction). This sacramental dimension of the church celebrating “privileged moments in communicating the divine life to man, are at the very core of priestly ministry.”<sup>23</sup> The priest acts in the person of Christ, and because the sacraments “have become the only effective moments for transmitting the contents of the faith”<sup>24</sup>, the priest is seen as the prime instrument of passing on such a faith. Central to this is the Eucharist or Mass: “No Christian community can be built up unless it grows from and hinges on to the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist ... For in the

most Blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church”<sup>25</sup>

Comparable to this in the Bahá’í Faith is the celebration by the community of the Nineteen-Day Feast. Unlike the Mass in Roman Catholicism, however, there is no celebrant. ‘Abdul-Bahá tells us that the Feast should be conducted in a manner where the responsibility of all participants is to bring about “knowledge, understanding, faith, assurance, love, affinity, kindness, purity of purpose, attraction of hearts and union of souls”<sup>26</sup>, where the owner of the house hosting the Feast serves the participants. Feasts are also held in Bahá’í Centres, and one of the believers or a family acts as host. “If the Feast is arranged in this manner and in the way mentioned, that supper is the ‘Lord’s Supper’, for the result is the same result and the effect is the same effect.”<sup>27</sup>

Also absent from the celebration of the Feast is an overemphasis on ritual. The Guardian wrote specifically on the use of rituals that “Bahá’u’lláh has reduced all ritual and form to an absolute minimum in His Faith”<sup>28</sup>, and goes on to state that Bahá’í teachings “warn against developing a system of uniform and rigid rituals incorporating man-made forms and practices, such as exist in other religions where rituals usually consist of elaborate ceremonial practices performed by a member of the clergy.”<sup>29</sup> The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, places the priest centre-stage: “The priest has a mission to promote the cult of the Eucharistic presence ... thereby making his own church a Christian ‘house of prayer.’”<sup>30</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined some of the issues surrounding the paradigms of administration found in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Bahá’í Faith. At first sight there appears to be a great difference between both administrations. The Roman Catholic tradition is governed by a clerical leadership, which seems to wield a strong control over the faithful, as is the case

in most religious traditions, both Christian and non-Christian. It is hierarchical by nature, with authority being administered from the top. The Bahá'í Administration has pronounced democratic features, is not clerical and operates out of a servant model of leadership with a strong emphasis on consultation and decision-making in the community. However, the threefold role of the Roman Catholic priest – Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments, and Leader of the Community – has some elements also in the Bahá'í Administration. The difference is that in the Bahá'í Faith, these roles are not confined to a special group of people who undergo intensive training at the end of which there is a ceremony or ritual and they become life-members of a priestly group. In the Bahá'í Faith, each believer is challenged to undertake these tasks – for example, teaching the Faith. While there are no sacraments or Mass in the Bahá'í Faith, believers are encouraged to participate in and to host Nineteen-Day Feasts and devotional meetings. Likewise the believer is encouraged to participate, if elected, in the consultations of the Local or National Spiritual Assemblies, and, if appointed, to serve as a Counsellor, Auxiliary Board Member or assistant for the protection or propagation of the Faith.

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## **SOUNDING: The Web and Weft of Civilisation – Art and Learning in the Bahá’í Community by *Aodhán Floyd***

The Irish National Spiritual Assembly has identified the need to pursue the “enhancement of the intellectual and artistic life of the community.”<sup>1</sup> The responsibility for this has devolved upon the Association for Bahá’í Studies, the National School Board, the Adib Taherzadeh Training Institute and the National Educational Committee. In doing so, the point is made explicit that an intellectual and artistic culture is a consequence of systems of education. One of the challenges, therefore, of the Five Year Plan is the systematic enhancement of the relationship between education and art.

To an artist, intellectual and artistic activity are complementary. Ideas cross-fertilise and stimulate. To a Bahá’í, all aspects of thought and inquiry are linked by the principle of independent investigation of truth and by insights gained from the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. Shoghi Effendi, in reference to Bahá’í scholarship, calls for “the truths enshrined in our Faith” to be presented “intelligently and enticingly.”<sup>2</sup> This advice can apply equally to arts practitioners. Such an approach will “widen the range of people attracted to its truths, greatly enhance its prestige and influence, and broaden the foundation of the world civilisation to which the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh will ultimately give rise.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, learning and experimentation through the integrated use of the arts will energise and enrich Bahá’í communities; it can also provide a model of community arts for educational programmes and activities. This is especially suited to activities aimed at promoting broader social integration.

Education, both formal and informal, is the most effective way to shape people’s values, attitudes and skills. To “educate” is to draw out of a person something potential or latent. From

this older pedagogic sense comes the central metaphor of individual and social transformation in the Bahá'í Writings:

Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognise the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.<sup>4</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá defines human and spiritual education as follows:

Human education signifies civilisation and progress, that is to say ... the activities essential to man. Divine education is that of the Kingdom of God: it consisteth in acquiring divine perfections, and this is true education; for in this state man becomes the focus of divine blessings, the manifestation of the word, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, and after Our likeness.’<sup>5</sup>

This *becoming* is the essence of the Bahá'í vision of education. It is “the gradual discovery of what it means to be human, the search for a personal identity, an identity which brings individual autonomy within community structure.”<sup>6</sup> This discovery is safeguarded on the condition “that man’s river flows into the mighty sea, and draw from God’s ancient source this inspiration. When this cometh to pass, then every teacher is as a shoreless ocean, every pupil a prodigal fountain of knowledge.”<sup>7</sup>

This search is dependent upon moral and intellectual discipline. Its true purpose is spiritual – to learn to be free from



prejudice and ignorance. The appropriate framework for this ideal development can be located in community structure: as part of study circles, children's classes, the Nineteen Day Feast, and the Summer School programmes. Bahá'ís are increasingly aware of the capacity of creative arts to become part of a process of imaginative and rigorous expression and inquiry.

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the investigating mind as attentive and alive: "Through the processes of inductive reasoning he is informed of all that appertains to humanity, its status, conditions and problems and weaves the web and texture of civilisation."<sup>8</sup>

To my mind, this is the domain of the artist. The value of the creative arts is their unique capacity to offer not only knowledge about a subject but an active participation in it. They challenge us to move from being passive consumers and, instead, to create meaning. Art is revolutionary in that it seeks to change consciousness, to refine, elaborate, and deepen it. Meaning is gained through the critical interaction between individual vision and greater cultural narratives. Art is so much more than luxury objects or an entertainment industry. Now, more than ever, it is a human necessity, a function of the attentive self, active in the face of the commodified and alienated experience of late capitalism. It grows out of, and reflects, illuminates and integrates our inner selves. It is an act of hope and, potentially, it is prayer.

In the Idealist tradition from Plato to Goethe, "Fine art is not real art till it is in this sense free, and only achieves its highest task when it takes its place in the same sphere as religion and philosophy, and has become simply a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance the Divine Nature, the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind."<sup>9</sup>

Of course, there are limits. I don't think artists should ever claim to offer salvation or explain away that which can never be known: "Souls shall be perturbed as they make

mention of Me. For minds cannot grasp Me nor hearts contain Me.”<sup>10</sup> Great art extends into unknown areas. It is precisely this open-ended quality which tends to reject fixed literal meanings and accommodates ambiguity, which can be confusing and disturbing. The situation can be complicated by further confusion between the stating of solutions to a problem and the artist’s role, which is to pose problems and reorientate perspectives. An artist as a facilitator does not prescribe, but instead leads. Reflective questions are asked rather than statements made.

The writer Bahíyyih Nakhjavání finds that “theatre provides a natural means to resolve the questions it raises through the dramatic use of interruption or delay. Theatre does not answer questions: it allows them to be heard; it permits for differing, sometimes contradictory interpretations; it invites the clash of opinions and recognises the difference as dramatically necessary.”<sup>11</sup> The example she chooses from Bahá’í history is the Conference of Badasht. Significantly, Shoghi Effendi interprets this moment of crisis as a dramatisation of the spiritual struggle within the Bábí community between Old and New Dispensations, orchestrated by Bahá’u’lláh, “Who steadily, unerringly, yet unexpectedly, steered the course of that memorable episode and ... brought it to its final and dramatic climax.”<sup>12</sup> The movement of drama can blur the distinction between audience and actors and subvert habitual expectations. Edward Said, in conversation with the conductor Daniel Barenboim, observed of Barenboim’s Weinmar masterclasses with young Israeli and Arab musicians that simply by playing together as an orchestra will change their lives; “it’s really quite subversive, isn’t it?”<sup>13</sup>

The Kildare Reminiscence Theatre Project also encourages participants “to engage in imagining a space in which new definitions and concepts of who we are can take place.”<sup>14</sup> Reminiscence Theatre draws on the memories and experiences of older people to honour their lives. In creative co-operation (or play) with different age groups, these

workshops use drama “as a means of physical, mental and spiritual exercise.”<sup>15</sup> Such community arts practice advocate the foundation principle of social integration, unity in diversity.

The arts are “disciplined forms of inquiry and expression through which to organise feelings and ideas about experience.”<sup>16</sup> It is important that we recognise the creative arts as a particular form of intelligence and a mode of learning of “great educative power.”<sup>17</sup> Bahá’u’lláh makes clear that reality is essentially symbolic or metaphorical: “Whatever is in the heaven and whatever is on earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God.”<sup>18</sup> Art and religion share a similar “veiled” language to illuminate reality. In the view of the poet Robert Hayden: “When we speak of Bahá’u’lláh as being a poet, in a sense it is very true, because a Prophet uses symbols, speaks in parables, uses metaphor and all the devices we associate with poetry.”<sup>19</sup> Metaphor is an expressive device which elliptically illustrates one thing by reference to another: their meanings are fused. The newly created relation bridges and reveals the relation between reality and imagination. For example, in William George’s deeply moving and funny play, *The Kingfisher’s Wing: The Story of Badí’* (which toured Ireland in 1996), the image of a kingfisher’s wing becomes, in my reading, a metaphor for Badí’ ’s sacrifice. The associations – fleeting life, fleeting movement, the flash of scarlet, the allusion to kingship – all strike with the force of insight. The experience is total. To achieve a similar sense of revelation is the ambition of any conscientious artist. The challenge as a Bahá’í is to consciously do so in light of the knowledge of Revelation. In this process, the intellect is a harmonising or disciplining influence. However, I believe, it is a spiritual impulse that produces an essential tension and emotional urgency. It is the only agency that quickens: “The ... arts which the ablest hands have produced ... are but the manifestations of the quickening power released by His [Christ’s] transcendent, His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spirit.”<sup>20</sup>

Humanity's primary duty is the independent search for truth. As Edwin McCloughan reminds us in the previous issue of *Solas*: "The independent investigation of truth ... is first and foremost a process of spiritualisation."<sup>21</sup> Aesthetic experience has a part to play in our spiritual lives. Sensuous engagement amplifies the soul's response, as in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's beautiful description of the effect of music: " ... if there be love in the heart, through melody, it will increase until its intensity can scarcely be borne."<sup>22</sup> Taking responsibility for our own learning is vital in this process of spiritualisation: "Whoso ariseth among you to teach the Cause of his Lord, let him, before all else, teach his own self, that his speech may attract the hearts of men that hear him. Unless he teaches his own self, the words of his mouth will not affect the heart of the seeker."<sup>23</sup>

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that we are all potential seekers. We all possess an innate desire to know and to love God. Bahá'u'lláh assures us that "every man hath been, and will continue to be able of himself to appreciate the Beauty of God, the Glorified."<sup>24</sup> The attraction for beauty and thirst for knowledge should shape both our moral purpose and our teaching methods. The most successful way is through guided self-discovery. Facilitators and participants are involved as co-artists. It should be a process that is flexible, empowering, collaborative and illuminating.

An enhanced intellectual and artistic life is a measure of the maturity and health of the Bahá'í community. It is a testament to an essential quality of the spirit – an imaginative and questing mind. If, as T.S. Eliot thought, "The truth has to become my truth before it can become truth at all"<sup>25</sup>, then art is "a way to work to the truth"<sup>26</sup> and to embody understanding.

In conclusion, it is a cultural imperative that an education that will initiate critical enquiry, stimulate individual spiritual growth, and consolidate community identity should be one that will harness people's creativity. The source of our talents is the power of reflection:

Make ye every effort that out of this ideal mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth.<sup>27</sup>

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# **The Long, Withdrawing Roar: The Crisis of Faith and Nineteenth-Century English Poetry by Edwin McCloughan**

## **Abstract**

*The following paper was originally submitted to my Modern English tutor in University College, Dublin at the end of 1991 as part of my final year's study for a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Language and Literature. It was my Bahá'í-orientated response to the argument that the crisis of faith in the late nineteenth century was conditioned by historical circumstances and has therefore little relevance for a contemporary reader. It has subsequently been much revised and, it is hoped, much improved. Biblical citations are from the King James Version of the Bible; the dates after most of the cited poems are of the year of their composition rather than publication.*

## **Continuing Crises**

To contemporary students of literature, the so-called Victorian age (1832–1901)<sup>1</sup> can pose difficulties of evaluation because of its relative closeness to our own. As G.D. Klingopulos has observed: “The kinds of problem which confronted them [the Victorians] – political, educational, religious, cultural – bear a strong resemblance to, and are often continuous with, the problems which confront us at the present time”.<sup>2</sup> It therefore requires considerable effort to see this period in a way that is objective and that avoids negative preconceptions: in making assessments about the issues which thrust into doubt many of the long-cherished attitudes and assumptions common to “the Bible-reading, church-going, sabbatarian generation”<sup>3</sup> of the Victorian era, we are in effect making assessments about issues that have continued to absorb and to plague all strata of society right down to the present. Indeed, it is increasingly evident that the gradual loss of religious assurance during the second half of

the nineteenth century has served to ensure that religion – understood as a belief system or “voluntary submission to a Higher Power”<sup>4</sup> and which has played so preponderant a role in shaping and defining the values, mores and structures of civilisation – no longer remains a potent force ministering effectively to the urgent needs of an extremely distressed world: as of this writing, at least 1 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water, 40 per cent of the world’s population is threatened with malaria and some 40 million people have AIDS. Instead, religious beliefs have, for increasing numbers of people, been more or less relegated to obsolescence,<sup>5</sup> dismissed as otherworldly superstitions, displaced by rationalism and science or ousted by a plethora of New Age disciplines; as a direct consequence of the import now attached to scientific discoveries, a strongly secular worldview has emerged and become dominant. Its intellectual prestige and social relevance having been eclipsed, religion, alternating with upsurges in fundamentalism which poison the wells of tolerance,<sup>6</sup> has, in many cases, degenerated “into a decent formula wherewith to embellish a comfortable life”.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, I will try to show that the decay of religion as a stabilising social force in the twentieth century originated most markedly during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), and that certain historical circumstances have coalesced to determine the secular, relativistic, postmodernist worldview that is so distinctive a feature of present-day intellectual life. This decay, I will venture, resulted from both the apparent failure of Messianic expectations in the first half of the nineteenth century and the disappointment resulting therefrom and, to a more noticeable extent, in the unprecedented and supremely “destructive”<sup>8</sup> conflict that erupted between religion and science soon after the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* in late 1859.



In the canon of English literature, this crisis of faith and doubt finds its most eloquent, incisive and memorable expression in much of the poetry of the period, and the paper throughout will cite the work of mainly nineteenth-century poets who responded to this crisis in ways that are still relevant to both students of literary history and contemporary readers of poetry.

### **The Sea of Faith Ebbs**

In the opening chapter of *The Imperishable Dominion*, Udo Schaefer singles out four European thinkers whose views contributed immensely to diminishing the enormous authority that had been wielded by religion (or rather by religious institutions), and who thereby laid the foundations for the construction of the secular world in which we now live: Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>9</sup> Each had rigorously interrogated and boldly rewritten what Karen Armstrong calls “the dialogue between an absolute, ineffable reality and mundane events”,<sup>10</sup> and reached such inevitably controversial conclusions as seeing religion as “a degrading form of alienation” (Feuerbach), “the opium of the people” (Marx) and “the outcome of infantile desires in adults who long for the shelter of childhood” (Freud). Most pungently, Nietzsche had pronounced that ““God is Dead,”” a pronouncement whose repercussions were articulated in Thomas Hardy’s *God’s Funeral* (1908–10):

#### XI

‘How sweet is was in years far hied  
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,  
To lie down liegely at the eventide  
And feel a blest assurance he [God] was there!

#### XII

‘And who or what shall fill his place?  
Whither will wanderers turn distracted eyes

For some fixed star to stimulate their pace  
Towards the goal of their enterprise?' ...

A social system or philosophy based explicitly on divine precepts was challenged and incrementally replaced by the thesis that economics and politics were the only aspects of civilisation deemed to be of any substantive or enduring significance. Marx, for example, had asserted that recorded history, rather than being “an epic written by the finger of God”,<sup>11</sup> amounted essentially to a long and bitter series of class struggles.<sup>12</sup>

Before such a materialistic conception of human history became embedded in the twentieth-century consciousness, however, institutionalised religion, especially since the dissemination of relativist, empirical Enlightenment philosophies as an alternative to absolutist religious worldviews during the eighteenth century, was steadily relinquishing its ability to satisfy the yearnings of the mind and heart. Hardy, for instance, had mused that the “faiths by which my comrades stand / Seem fantasies to me” (*The Impercipient – At a Cathedral Service*, 3–4) while in *Hap*, dating from 1866, he ponders a world devoid of benign or providential guidance:

– Crass casualty obstructs the sun and rain,  
And dicing time for gladness casts a moan ... (11–12).

Emily Brontë wrote on January 2nd, 1846 a paean to her Creator (subsequently titled *No Coward Soul is Mine*) in which appears the forthright declaration:

Vain are the thousand creeds  
That move men’s hearts, unutterably vain,  
Worthless as withered weeds  
Of idlest froth amid the boundless main,

To waken doubt in one  
Holding so fast by thy infinity  
So surely anchored on  
The steadfast rock of Immortality (9–16).

On the other side of the Atlantic in 1861, Emily Dickinson, who similarly achieved posthumous literary celebrity, wryly presented the traditional Christian belief in the physical resurrection thus:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –  
Untouched by Morning –  
And untouched by Noon –  
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection –  
Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!  
Grand go the Years – in the Crescent – above them –  
Worlds scoop their Arcs –  
And Firmaments – row –  
Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender –  
Soundless as flakes – on a Disc of Snow – (1–10).

“God’s in his heaven – / All’s right with the world!” are among the most quoted lines from Victorian poetry. Yet they appear in *Pippa Passes* (1841), the first of Robert Browning’s collection of squalid tales about a heroine who, working in a sweatshop 364 days a year, is about to be sent to Rome as a prostitute; a man and woman living in adultery have just murdered the woman’s husband; a peevish set of bohemians has tricked a youth into marriage: the overall poem, despite Pippa’s affirmation, by no means verifies that all is right with the world. Many readings of Browning’s *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* (1852) find it more expressive of contemporary despair than of the confidence now casually associated with burgeoning Victorian progress, the landscape of the eponymous questing knight being grim and nightmarish, betokening those found in such a poem as T.S. Eliot’s *The*

*Hollow Men* (1925); at times Roland's quest verges on the horrific: " – It may have been a water-rat I speared, / But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek" (125–6). In *Hymn to Prosperine* (1866), with its tension between the libertine splendours of paganism and the sterility of state-sponsored Christianity, Algernon Charles Swinburne included iconoclastic lines like the following (spoken by a Roman patrician and poet influenced by Julian the Apostate):

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world  
has grown grey from thy breath...  
...Yet thy kingdom shall pass, Galilean, thy dead  
shall go down to thee dead...

And in the rhyming couplets of *The Latest Decalogue* and of *XII* respectively, Arthur Hugh Clough and A.E. Housman satirised the hypocritical constraints imposed by religio-social injunctions:

The sum of all is, thou shalt not love,  
If anybody, God above.  
At any rate shall never labour  
More than thyself to love thy neighbour (21–4).

And since, my soul, we cannot fly  
To Saturn nor to Mercury,  
Keep we must, if keep we can,  
These foreign laws of God and man (21–4).

Schaefer summarises this attitude of disillusionment when he states: "The dominant role which science has assumed in modern society has tended to turn religious conviction into a private matter and expel it from the socio-political sphere".<sup>13</sup> If anything, the advances made by science and technology have been coterminous with the retreat of religion, as mourned by

Matthew Arnold in the elaborate metaphor of his most famous poem, *Dover Beach* (1851):

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar  
Retreating to the breath  
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world (21–8).

Yet in the midst of the worst excesses of British industrialisation – “And all is seared with trade, smeared with toil; / And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod” (*God's Grandeur*, 6–8) – the Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, drew consolation from the myriad wonders of “dearest” natural freshness and the dove-like Holy Ghost brooding “over the bent / World ... with warm breast and with ah! bright wings” (13–14).

Decades after the French Revolution, Christianity, the religion of transcendent redemption *par excellence*, was to become transformed into a number of surrogate faiths: one has only to read Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) – published in London on the eve of an outbreak of political revolutions in Paris, Rome, Venice, Berlin and other European cities – to notice the way in which the fundamental Judaeo-Christian doctrine of the salvation of the soul had come to be replaced by the perception of the human being as a socio-economic functionary (rather than an essentially spiritual being) and by the salvation inscribed in Communist tenets which would lead ultimately to the realisation of an egalitarian order consequent upon the victory of the proletariat hitherto oppressed and exploited by bourgeois capitalism:

In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.

In all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time.

Finally, they labour everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries.

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!<sup>14</sup>

One possible reason this transformation should have occurred in the Christian West lies with an examination of the teachings revealed by Jesus Christ Himself.

### **New Wine, Old Wineskins**

Christ's Revelation was one directed primarily at the individual, at his or her relations with other individuals, and focused itself on the moulding of personal moral conduct and a striving for spiritual excellence through conscious discipline:

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Matthew 5:14–16).

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

This emphasis on God's passionate interest in, and concern for, the individual personality, on the worth of "slave or free, male or female, gentile or Jew",<sup>15</sup> was extremely radical in "a world where the poor little man was only a pawn in a game he could not control".<sup>16</sup> This, and the love of God for all (John 4:42, John 8:12, John 10:16, Matthew 28:19) – not alone the chosen people to whom Christ ministered – were crucial to His teachings, which laid much greater stress on service to others and the cultivation of the "gentler virtues of pity and forgiveness, of charity and self-sacrifice"<sup>17</sup> than on the external, meticulous observance of such religious duties as prayer, fasting and almsgiving: for Christ, the correct *intention* on the part of the individual was paramount. This differentiation was further extended by St Paul's formulation, in his appeal to Gentile audiences in the Diaspora, of a doctrine of antinomianism (anti-legalism) and of acknowledging the messianic, salvific figure of Jesus, through Whom God had been reconciled to postlapsarian humanity: "As in Adam all shall die, so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22); "For it pleased the Father that in him [Jesus] should all fulness dwell; And having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself, by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven" (Colossians 1:19–20).

"That ye have love one to another" (John 13:35) became the criterion of Christian discipleship, even if another should be a Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37, Luke 17:15–17, John 4:3–42), a Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5–13), a Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20), a Syro-Phoenician Gentile woman (Mark 7:25–30), a woman whose condition made her unclean and a social outcast (Mark 5:25–34), a prostitute (Luke 7:24–30), an adulteress (John 8:1–11), a tax-collector (Matthew 9:10–13, 21, 31 and 32), a child (Mark 10:13–16) or a penitent criminal (Luke 23:40–43). Two of the Mosaic social laws He explicitly modified were the

loosening of strict Sabbath observance (Mark 2:23–28) and the tightening of divorce (Matthew 12:1–8). Nowhere in the four canonical Gospel accounts did Christ impart any definitive guidance about how the communities of His followers should be governed and administered, however. The civilisation that arose upon His Teachings and example and that reached its zenith in the fourth century<sup>18</sup> was thus strong in the case of individual morality but fragile in terms of social co-ordination. Shunning affairs of state (John 6:14–15, Matthew 22:17–22, John 18:36) and, like His forerunner, John the Baptist, reserving some of His sternest condemnations for sacerdotal hypocrisy and venality (Matthew 23:13–36, Luke 11:37–52, 12:1), Christ founded no institutions, though the subsequent institutions that bore His Name were derived for the most part by inference or invention from His utterances as recorded in the Gospel.<sup>19</sup> Of this Professor John Hatcher has commented:

... virtually at the moment of Christ's death, major difficulties arose as to how radically different this institution would be from what had preceded it, how the institution should be formed, how administered, how sustained. And because Christ left little explicit guidance about how these tasks should be accomplished, it is not hard to trace in the early history of the Christian church how the good intentions of the apostles and the patristic fathers, coupled with the confusion about the question of Christology (the nature and station of Christ), almost immediately distracted and perverted the essential teachings of Christ to the extent that by the fourth century, the Christian institution as the body of Christ was irreparably severed from the spiritual verities that constituted the soul of Christ's ministry. The wineskin, mutilated beyond repair, allowed the wine to trickle upon the earth and thus become mixed with baser stuff.<sup>20</sup>



After, say, the Industrial Revolution in the later eighteenth century, Western civilisation found itself struggling to evolve a system that successfully integrated Christian personal ethics with social justice necessitated by the accelerating interdependence of nation-states and by the new frameworks of democratic government which had emerged upon the collapse of the feudal order. It was this cleavage between individual and collective morality – in the broadest sense between the best interests and rights of the individual and those of all nations and races – that called for a religious paradigm corresponding to the relatively sophisticated degree of social and cultural progress that had been achieved at that stage in humanity’s evolution. As pointed out by Horace Holley, the “man-to-God and ... man-to-man revelation”<sup>21</sup> that was orthodox Christianity came under intense pressure during the nineteenth century, an age of “strenuous activity and dynamic change, of ferment of ideas and recurrent social unrest, of great inventiveness and expansion”,<sup>22</sup> one that demanded what Holley generically terms “a man-to-men revelation.” Hence the birth and proliferation of so many man-made polities, ideologies and utopian and social reform movements during a period that witnessed large-scale endeavours to create a just society with the abolition of serfdom and slavery, the unfoldment of the national state and the development and spread of democracy.<sup>23</sup>

If religion was to be relevant or meaningful now, it should address humankind as a whole, specifically its “collective spiritual consciousness”;<sup>24</sup> as Count Leo Tolstoy put it:

I believe that at this very hour the great revolution is beginning which has been preparing for two thousand years in the religious world – the revolution which will substitute for corrupted religion, and the system of domination which proceeds therefrom, the true religion, the basis of equality between men, and the true liberty to which all beings endowed with reason aspire.<sup>25</sup>

## He Cometh With Clouds

... When it is evening, ye say, it will be fair weather; for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites [Pharisees and Sadducees], ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times? (Matthew 16:2–3).

... Kill not the Moth nor the Butterfly,  
For the last Judgment draweth nigh ...

William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence* (39–40, c. 1803)

“The nineteenth century,” notes Michael Sours, “witnessed what was probably the most dramatic period of Messianic expectation in Christian history”.<sup>26</sup> The Second Coming of Christ had been a prominent feature of belief during the ministries of Peter and Paul and the early centuries of Christianity. But by the fifth century – marked by the establishment of a hierarchical ecclesiastical order – it had more or less disappeared. During the Renaissance, a similarly vivid interest was once again shown in the Day of Judgment: Nicolás Florentino has a painting of it in what is now the Old Cathedral of Salamanca and Michaelangelo a fresco of it in the Sistine Chapel dating from 1541.

By the eighteenth century, the return of Christ again came to the fore in circles of Christian thought: Isaac Newton and Charles Wesley, among others, had written of its imminence. The French Revolution of 1789 was construed by those versed in Scripture as being the prelude to the long-awaited Biblical apocalypse (as detailed in the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation). In the words of Geoffrey Nash: “It was not merely a political event, or even the destruction of an old order; it was a new advent, the point of genesis of a new age and a new world”.<sup>27</sup> William Wordsworth recollected the initial

significance of the Revolution there in the Ninth Book of *The Prelude* (1805):

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven! O times ...  
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,  
A prime Enchantress – to assist the work  
Which then was going forward in her name!  
Not favoured spots alone, but *the whole earth*  
*The beauty wore of promise* – that which sets  
(As at some moments might not be unfelt  
Among the bowers of Paradise itself)  
The budding rose above the rose full blown.  
What temper at the prospect did not wake  
To happiness unthought of? The inert  
Were roused, and lively natures rapt away!  
(108–9, 14–24, emphasis added).

A cataclysmic event like the French Revolution prefigured the advent of a Messiah: Emperor Louis Napoleon in France, the Irish Catholic Liberator, Daniel O’Connell, and Italian patriots, Mazzini and Garibaldi, were but four figures of messianic charisma who rose to leadership in Europe. (The same trend was repeated in the twentieth century with totalitarian dictators like Mussolini, Franco, Hitler and Stalin, though with devastating consequences.) Numerous Romantic writers produced theories which “admitted the possibility of the entrance of a universal Messiah”.<sup>28</sup>

Probably the most sustained and daring expression of this grand theoretical strain was seen in the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley, who portrayed such a possibility in his Lyrical Drama, *Prometheus Unbound* (1819–20), in whose *Preface* was stated: “Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noblest ends”.<sup>29</sup> Revered by early humankind as the mediator of many useful

arts and sciences, Prometheus, outwitting Zeus, the chief Olympian, climbed the heavens and stole fire from the gods from the chariot of the sun and was punished by being chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus until rescued from his torture by Hercules; writing in 1841, Marx hailed him as “the foremost saint and martyr in the philosopher’s calendar”.<sup>30</sup> It seemed the liberation of Prometheus from the tyrannical captivity of Jupiter (Act III, Scene 1), like that experienced by citizens in America and then in France from British and monarchical rule respectively, symbolised the ultimate triumph of the forces of human progress and an all-compelling sense of humanity’s regeneration:

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains  
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed – but man:  
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,  
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, – the King  
Over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man:  
Passionless? no – yet free from guilt or pain,  
Which were, for his will made, or suffered them,  
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,  
From chance and death and mutability,  
The clogs of that which else might oversoar  
The loftiest star of unascended heaven,  
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane (193–204).

In the figure of Prometheus’ consort, Asia, as remarked by Professor Ross Woodman, Shelley achieves his apocalyptic desire: her unveiling (“Some good change / Is working in the elements which suffer / Thy presence thus unveiled,” II. v. 18–20), which prefigures the Revelation of Christ returned in the glory of the Father, is “a vision of the New Jerusalem [Revelation 21:2] descending as a bride to earth, which is, by virtue of her descent, recreated into an earthly paradise”<sup>31</sup> Shelley concluded his Lyrical Drama, *Hellas*, written in 1821 and inspired by the Greek proclamation of independence,

followed by the war of deliverance from the Turks, with a female Chorus combining a celebration and an entreaty:

The world's great age begins anew  
The golden years return,  
The earth doth like a snake renew  
Her winter weeds outworn;  
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam  
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream ...

O cease! must hate and death return?  
Cease! must men kill and die?  
Cease! Drain not to its dregs the urn  
Of bitter prophecy.  
The world is weary of the past,  
O might it die or rest at last! (1–6, 37–42).

An unmistakable note of apocalyptic excitement also runs through Shelley's most accomplished lyric, *Ode to the West Wind* (1819), which ends:

... Be through my lips to unawakened earth  
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? (68–70).

This eschatological theme was continued in poems by James Russell Lowell, Edward Marshall, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and a venerable, nationalistic hymn for North America by Julia Ward Howe:

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth with falsehood for the good or evil side.  
Some great Cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the  
bloom or blight,  
And the choice goes by forever, 'twixt that darkness and that  
light

*(The Present Crisis, 5–8).*

By your greater selves; and by the love I see flowing surely  
from you to me;  
By these I put all evil aside ...  
I show you the inheritance of riches of all time.  
Yet sorrow, the best of gifts, revealer of eternal joy, I give you  
not:  
But One shall come in the night-time, bringing it, to transmute  
the world for you,  
Taking you by the hand, even while you live, through the great  
gate of Death, into Elsyian fields  
*(Towards Democracy).*

Ring out the shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;  
Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be  
*(In Memoriam A.H.H., Section 106, 25–32).*

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are  
stor'd;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword  
His truth is marching on  
*(The Battle-Hymn of the Republic, 1–4).*

Something of this excitement is even evident in the final stanza of Hopkins's *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1875), commemorating the death by drowning of five Franciscan nuns exiled from Germany:

Dame, at our door  
 Drowned, and among our shoals,  
 Remember us in the roads, the heaven-haven of the  
 Reward:  
 Our King back, oh, upon English souls!  
 Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us,  
 be a crimson-cressed east,  
 More brightening her, rare-dear Britain, as his reign rolls,  
 Pride, rose, prince, hero of us, high-priest,  
 Our hearts' charity's hearth's fire, our thoughts' chivalry's  
 throng's  
 Lord.

Adventist movements were started, the most famous of which (and the inspiration for Lowell's above poem) was that headed by William Miller, a farmer and former atheist from Vermont, New England, whose intensive reading of the Book of Daniel and other prophecies from the Old and New Testaments had firmly convinced him that the return of Christ was at hand. He fixed the date of the return at 1843–4 (other variations being 1836 and 1866).

Like the Jews who eagerly awaited their Messiah but whose religious leaders, attentive to the letter but heedless of the spirit of Moses' Revelation (John 5:46–7, Matthew 23:37–8), had refused to recognise and accept the Divinity manifested by Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:11, 1:29, 6:41–2, 7:25–36, Luke 7:18–23, 14:16–30, Matthew 5:17, Matthew 23:37, John 26:59–66), Christian millenarians misapprehended their Scriptures by misreading their figurative language. Thus Christ's prophecy – "... then they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30) – was understood to be literal with the result that "on one notorious occasion a concourse of votaries assembled at a designated spot to watch the clouds from which

before nightfall a white-robed Messiah was to descend to earth”.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the followers of the diverse Christian denominations and sects had all contrived their own Messiah, Someone Who would conform solely to the expectations which they themselves had conceived.

When these fervent hopes and expectations were not realised – when no white-robed Messiah was seen to descend on a cloud to earth – disappointment filled the hearts of Christians and enthusiasm died away. (The Seventh-Day Adventists, as Miller’s followers thereafter styled themselves, refer to this period as “the Great Disappointment.”) The unparalleled millenarian zeal that had animated so many people was “channelled into the creation of nation states and the class politics that represented centres of mass power”:<sup>33</sup> absolute national sovereignty, though inseparably part of an unprecedented process of what is now called globalisation, became a fetish.

A telling comparison can be made between the optimistic hopes pervading the excerpts of eschatological verse quoted above and the poignancy, irony and cynicism so evident in the poems of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Isaac Rosenberg – which graphically exposed the reality of the First World War’s trench battles – and in T.S. Eliot’s gloomy masterpiece, *The Waste Land* (1921), one of whose speakers concedes, “I can connect / Nothing with nothing” (“The Fire Sermon,” 301–2), to see just how the embers of millenarianism had been kindled into the world-devouring conflagration of chauvinistic aggression. In other words, the jubilant prospects that had galvanised millenarianism became those that spawned imperialism and the aggrandisement and vaunted superiority of the white race, epitomised by this paragraph from the Introduction to H.A.L. Fisher’s *A History of Modern Europe*:

It is, moreover, to European man that the world owes the incomparable gifts of modern science. To the conquest of nature through knowledge the contributions made by



Asiatics have been negligible and by Africans (Egyptians excluded) non-existent. The printing press and the telescope, the steam-engine, the internal combustion engine and the aeroplane, the telegraph and the telephone, wireless broadcasting, the cinematograph, and the gramophone and television, together with all the leading discoveries in physiology, the circulation of the blood, the laws of respiration and the like, are the result of researches carried out by white men of European stock. It is hardly excessive to say that the material fabric of modern civilized life is the result of the intellectual daring and tenacity of the European peoples.<sup>34</sup>

For American expatriate Ezra Pound, however, writing in the aftermath of the First World War in 1919, civilisation was damned by his poet-persona, Hugh Selwyn Mauberly, “out of key with his time” (I, 1), as “botched,” “an old bitch gone in the teeth” (*Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, V, 89–90). W.B. Yeats in *The Second Coming*, referring to the Russian Revolution of 1917 (“Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed”) and unconsciously predicting the rise of Italian Fascism in the early 1920s, bemoaned the decline of civilisation:

... and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity (5–8).

For him, the Second Coming – in stark contrast to Shelley’s rhapsodic, melodious vision of universal regeneration in the Fourth Act of *Prometheus Unbound*, a book Yeats regarded as “sacred” – was a mysterious and terrible event, a nightmare similar to that depicted in the Fifth Section of *The Waste Land*:

... And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born (21–2)?

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water  
If there were water we should stop and drink  
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand  
If there were only water amongst the rock  
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit  
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
There is not even silence in the mountains  
But dry sterile thunder without rain  
There is not even solitude in the mountains  
But red sullen faces that sneer and snarl  
From doors of mudcracked houses  
If there were water  
("What the Thunder Said," 331–46).

However distorted its energies had been by the ruthless colonisation of territories in Africa, South America and much of the Middle and parts of the Far East, initially under the guise of a tremendous missionary effort, millenarianism was at some level an intuitive response to "a new spiritual force"<sup>35</sup> that had suddenly swept across Europe and North America, leading irresistibly to an unshakeable conviction that, commencing with the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolutions, a New Age had dawned and that the Kingdom heralded by Christ (Matthew 4:17, 6:9–10), together with the "new heaven and [the] new earth" (Revelation 21:1) anticipated by St John the Divine, was very soon to be established upon earth. Apart from reading Scriptural verses in an exclusively literal manner, the majority of millenarians did not look to the Eastern hemisphere where the sun of religion – Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism,

Judaism, Christianity and Islam – had always risen. For it was in Iran (Persia), a nation darkened by religious obscurantism, political corruption and an appalling decadence, that a young merchant from the city of Shiraz, Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad (a lineal descendant of the Prophet Muhammad), assumed the title of Báb (Arabic for “Gate”) in 1844 and subsequently made claims to be both an independent Messenger of God and the Herald of “Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest,” the Promised One of all religions. His revolutionary Cause spread rapidly throughout Iran and neighbouring Iraq, and He was publicly executed by firing squad in 1850. This martyrdom “made a great impression on late nineteenth-century Europe ... Monographs and literary works touching on the Báb and His martyrdom were published in a number of European countries ...”.<sup>36</sup> Following an assassination attempt on the Shah by a handful of deranged Bábís, a pogrom of martyrdoms ensued in the autumn of 1852.

The One for Whose advent the Báb had made ready the way and Who would usher in a divine, global civilisation was one of His own followers, Bahá’u’lláh (the Glory of God), an Iranian nobleman and the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith. Despite being stripped of His wealth and possessions and suffering torture, persecution, imprisonment, the relentless opposition of two of the Middle East’s most powerful despots, four designedly repressive exiles, the treachery of His half-brother and the death of His younger son, He revealed the equivalent of one hundred volumes of Scripture and summoned the world’s sovereigns and rulers – including Louis Napoleon III, Kaiser William I, Pope Pius IX, Czar Alexander II and Queen Victoria – to reconcile their differences and, through the holding of “an all-embracing assemblage”,<sup>37</sup> to implement measures that would lead to the creation and maintenance of world peace; the twentieth century would reap the whirlwind of ignoring Baha’u’llah’s dire warnings to these and various other political and religious leaders against injustice, tyranny and corruption. During His own ministry He had established

His religion in fifteen countries; today the community of His followers represents a microcosm of the human race, second only to Christianity in geographical range.<sup>38</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh's pivotal teaching was the oneness and the inevitable unity of the entire human race in what He designated a "new World Order",<sup>39</sup> which is to be the vehicle of a spiritual commonwealth. To Professor E.G. Browne, an English orientalist from Pembroke College, Cambridge, He addressed the following words two years before His death from fever in the Holy Land in 1892:

That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and difference of race be annulled – what harm is there in this? ... Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the 'Most Great Peace' shall come ... Do not you in Europe need this also? ... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind ...<sup>40</sup>

On September 23rd, 1893 at the inaugural World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, this statement was read from a paper by Reverend Henry Jessup, who wished to share the "Christ-like sentiments" uttered by the "famous Persian Sage" with his audience.<sup>41</sup>

Representing a "challenge, at once bold and universal"<sup>42</sup> to sexist, national, racial, economic, political and religious creeds, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, comprehensive and far-sighted in its outlook (the "wine" of His ethical and spiritual counsels) and precise yet flexible in its methodology (the "wineskins" required to contain and convey those counsels in upraising a divine social edifice), and with its view of humankind as "an organic unit which has undergone a growth process similar to that of the individual",<sup>43</sup> fell for the most

part on deaf ears: the clarion call had been sounded, but Christendom, whose custodians had been bidden to keep wakeful lest the Lord upon his return come and go like a thief in the night (Matthew 24:42–4, 50, Thessalonians 5:2–4, II Peter 3:10, 13), slumbered on leaving God to pass by.

### **Dancing to DNA's Music?**

The antagonism between religion and science began in earnest in 1543 with the publication of Polish canon Nicolas Copernicus' theories of a heliocentric universe, which ran totally counter to the Ptolemaic theory of a geocentric universe which had long been supported by the Churches. The title of his work was *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*The Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*), of which has been cogently remarked: "Not only was [it] about the revolutionary motions of astral bodies, it was also revolutionary in itself in its effects on human self-awareness and imagination".<sup>44</sup>

So it was that in spite of hypotheses grounded on ever-more scrupulous observation and systematic classification and collation of diverse phenomena – Johannes Kepler's three laws establishing that the earth is but a minor planet rather than the centre of the universe and that all of the planets travel around the sun in mathematically predictable elliptical orbits, William Harvey's lectures in 1616 in which he first put forward his view on the circulation of the blood and Carl Linnaeus's new, simplified rules for the taxonomy of flora and fauna published in *Systema Naturae* in 1735 – Christians were enjoined by their clerical leaders to continue to understand the Bible literally. What might have been abstract or spiritual realities clothed in the garments of symbol and metaphor – Christ's prophetic discourses or the scintillating, bizarre imagery in the Book of Revelation, for example – were held to be strictly literal and, because inspired by the Almighty, unalterably true: since God's natural laws were fixed and immutable, it was reasoned, so must be the comprehension of those laws. This intransigence also extended to all non-Christian religions. Had

not God definitively revealed His Will and Purpose through Jesus Christ alone and until the end of time?

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth (John 1:14) (emphasis added).

I am the way, and the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me ... (John 14:6).

Neither is there any salvation in any other [than Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ]: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 6:15–16).

This narrow perspective on Revelation, already disproved by the succession of towering Luminaries, Abraham, Moses and Christ, recounted in the Bible itself, conjoined with Christ's pointed statement to His disciples on the relativity of religious truth – "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye are not fit to bear them now" (John 16:12) – made the recognition and acceptance of any subsequent Luminary – the prime example being Muhammad – impossible for those wielding ecclesiastical authority.

These Churches, irreconcilably divided by Christological and theological doctrines and dogmas since the fourth and fifth centuries and by internal disputes over authority (exemplified by the Great Schism, when there were rival Popes in Avignon and in Rome between 1378 and 1417), showed themselves more preoccupied with temporal influence than in the genuine spiritual nurturing and empowerment of the laity; hence they maintained rigid orthodoxies. Scientists or, as they were then

known, natural philosophers, followed the courageous example set by Galileo Galilei – who, heretically enthusiastic about Copernicus’ theory and having greatly improved the telescope, was forced to recant before the Inquisition in Rome after the publication of his masterwork, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* [Ptolemaic and Copernican] in 1632 and who ended his days under house arrest at his Florence estate nine years later – began to read the universe as a text whose pages could disclose much about the interconnectedness and interdependence of all created things and, eventually, something of the origin of humanity: science became a revelatory discipline while religion, in the hands of authoritarian, self-serving and uninhibitedly worldly churchmen, already reeling under the Reformation, closed its doors to knowledge and discovery. Both Copernicus’ and Galileo’s books were banned by the Catholic Church until 1835, the Vatican officially absolving Galileo of his “heretical” astronomical discoveries only in 1993; it burnt Giordano Bruno, whom it had imprisoned and tried for eight years, at the stake in Rome in 1600 for insisting that the stars were actually suns: “Innumerable suns exist; innumerable earths revolve about these suns ... ” By the time of the Industrial Revolution, science had proved itself an extremely effective instrument for social betterment – as, for example, in the utilisation of steam by James Watt in 1769 for steamship transport and, after his death, for railway transport in 1825 (by 1870 England alone had 13,000 miles of railway); by confining itself to an anti-heretical code of morality and the absolution of innately sinful souls through the purchase of exclusive ecclesiastical mediation – “There is but one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church outside of which there is no salvation ... ” (Pope Boniface VIII’s *Unam Sanctum*) – religion was increasingly seen to be of little or no practical value by those with eyes to see. The public focus began “to shift ... to an eager stress on the present combined with an impatient hope for a social heaven on earth in the near future”.<sup>45</sup>

It remains the view that the Victorian age was unusually puritanical, one in which religion, at least of the conventional kind, was largely evangelical in character and purpose and in which austere moral conduct – whether social (propriety, conformity, respectability, decorum, discretion, obedience to authority) or sexual (women stereotyped as Madonnas or whores and, like children, subordinated to men in almost every sphere of public endeavour) – was the necessary straitjacket for carnal impulses to the extent that “erotically charged” table and piano legs were draped when ladies and gentlemen dined and conversed together. Despite its overtly prudish ethos and its severe gender and class stratifications, society had attained a state of confidence, as conveyed in the speech of Prince Albert at the opening of the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in Hyde Park in 1851:

We are living at a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish to that great end to which indeed all history points – the realization of the unity of mankind.<sup>46</sup>

Nine years before, the speaker of Tennyson’s monologue, *Locksley Hall*, had “dipped into the future” (119) and seen “a vision” of the denouement to the world’s conflicts and wars in what he termed “the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world” (128); this note had earlier been sounded by Scotland’s Robert Burns: “It’s coming yet, for a’ that / That man to man the warld o’er / Shall brothers be for a’ that” (*For a’ that and a’ that*). Londoner William Blake and New Yorker Walt Whitman (both self-published), in taut metre and rhyme and incantatory expansiveness respectively, had proclaimed this universality some sixty years apart:

Then every man of every clime,  
That prays in his distress,  
Prays to the human form divine,



Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,  
In heathen, Turk, or Jew.  
Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell,  
There God is dwelling too.  
(*The Divine Image*, 13–20, 1789).

You, whoever you are!  
You, daughter or son of England!  
You of the mighty Slavic tribes and empires!  
You Russ in Russia!  
You dim-descended, black, divine-souled African, large,  
fine-headed,  
Nobly-formed, superbly destined, on equal terms with  
me!...  
...All you continentals of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia,  
indifferent of place!  
All you on the numberless islands of the archipelagoes of  
the sea!  
And you of centuries hence, when you listen to me!  
And you, each and everywhere, whom I specify not, but  
include just the same!  
Health to you!  
Good will to you all – from me and America sent.  
Each of us inevitable;  
Each of us limitless – each of us with his or her right upon the  
earth;  
Each of us allowed the eternal purports of the earth;  
Each of us here as divinely as any is here  
(*Salute to the Whole World*).

Ever since Samuel B. Morse had sent the first telegram (bearing the words *What Hath God Wrought?*) from Washington, D.C. to his business partner, Alfred Vail, in Baltimore on May 24th, 1844, it seemed the world could at long last be shrunk to a

neighbourhood in terms of communication. This possibility, however ambitious it appeared then, bore witness to the strides that could and would be achieved exponentially in so many fields of technology and science, that first telegram being the prototype for today's speed-of-light telecommunications.

It was during this period of peace in Britain (disrupted by the Crimean War of 1854–6), yet confronted with the squalor of mining and the ugliness of industrial cities, the ravages of the countryside, the menace of mass unemployment, escalating poverty allied to unsanitary, overcrowded slums as well as high rates of infant mortality and contagious, often fatal disease and the terror of economic crisis, that naturalist Charles Darwin's theories of physical evolution were published. These theories were based on collections and reflections on the similarities and differences between various animal species garnered during his five-year voyage upon *HMS Beagle* to map the South American coast and delayed for twenty years for fear of adverse reaction. Not since Copernicus's *De revolutionibus* in 1543 (also delayed in its publication), which removed planet Earth and, by implication, man, its prime representative, from the centre of the known cosmos, had such a thunderbolt struck.

Two of the postulates advanced by Darwin in *The Origin of Species* that so perplexed and outraged church-going members of the English-speaking public were that by a long and very gradual process of "Natural Selection," or as he preferred to call it, "Survival of the Fittest," the millions of species of organic life on earth had developed from previously existing species and that at the stem of a very complex family tree there is probably one simple form of life – thus contradicting the traditional belief in God's creation of the universe in six days (Genesis 1:1–31) – and that human beings and apes are descended from a common but now extinct primate ancestor – thus contradicting the origin of humanity as illustrated by the story of the creation of Adam, the first man (Genesis 2:7), and of Eve, his "helpmeet" (2:18–23). Caricatured in the print media as a primate, he also won fierce

denunciations from conservative pulpits, instigating often heated debate and disagreement between creationists and evolutionists which continue to this day. With polemical gusto, Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's best-known "disciple," stated in an essay in 1860:

Who shall number the patient and earnest seekers after truth, from the days of Galileo until now, whose lives have been embittered and their good name blasted by the mistaken zeal of Bibiolators? Who shall count the host of weaker men whose sense of truth has been destroyed in the attempt to harmonize impossibilities – whose life has been wasted in the attempt to force the generous new wine of Science into the old bottles of Judaism, compelled by the same strong party?

... Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules; and history records that whenever science and orthodoxy have been fairly opposed, the latter has been forced to retire from the lists, bleeding and crushed, if not annihilated; scotched, if not slain.

Darwin held to his discoveries when he stated in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871):

... man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his *godlike* intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system – with all these exalted powers – Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his *lowly* origin (emphasis added).<sup>47</sup>

What was perhaps most startling about Darwin's theories was that evolution was without purpose (which approximated,

as he himself acknowledged, to philosophical speculation rather than scientific inquiry). Tennyson had entertained grave doubts about teleological certainty after reading Charles Lyell's *The Principles of Geology* (1830–3) which, with the vast collections of geological and fossil data available, indicated a longer history of the earth than that of four to six thousand years deduced from Scripture and taught by the Churches:

Are God and Nature then at strife,  
That nature lends such evil dreams?  
So careful of the type she seems,  
So careless of the single life,

That I, considering everywhere,  
Her secret meaning in her deeds,  
And finding that of fifty seeds  
She often brings but one to bear,

I falter where I firmly trod,  
And falling with my weight of cares  
Upon the great world's altar stairs  
That slope through darkness up to God,

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,  
And gather dust and chaff, and call  
To what I feel is Lord of all,  
And faintly trust the larger hope  
(*In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Section 55, 5–20).

However providential the fall of a sparrow (Matthew 10:29), chance, autonomy and, by implication, chaos, governed the operations of the universe, itself the work of what Oxford zoologist, leading Darwinist and best-selling author, Professor Richard Dawkins, sardonically terms a Blind Watchmaker.

“DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music,” he states in *River Out of Eden* (1995).

According to true religion, as opposed to the superstitious fancies, false imaginings and unquestioning adherence to monolithic but outmoded customs that represent the winter of religion castigated by, for instance, Feuerbach and Marx, evolution has been designed and orchestrated by God, and is not the outcome of blind chance or chaos. Dr Anjam Khursheed invokes two analogies – based on talks given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the eldest Son of Bahá’u’lláh and the appointed Interpreter of His Revelation, in about 1905 – to help explain humanity’s origin.

First, the human species developed like the seed of a tree. This seed was distinct and different from the seeds of other plants from the very beginning, though there may have been a time when other seeds physically resembled it. In analogous terms, the fact that the human species evolved directly after certain other species (invertebrates, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals) does not necessarily mean that it was derived from them.<sup>48</sup> Second, human evolution resembled that of a child in the womb of its mother. Although this child passes through various stages until it attains maturity – at one time an embryo and at another a foetus – it always follows one single line of development. Similarly although the human species evolved through different phases – those of an amphibian and of an anthropoid, for example – it was always a distinct species, uniquely endowed with the reasoning faculty, undergoing a continuous process of refinement.<sup>49</sup>

Scientists in general, and biologists and naturalists in particular, now recognise that a basic genetic unity underlies all diversities of organic life: “We are one species, one people. Every individual on this earth is a member of ‘homo sapiens sapiens’, and the geographical variations we see among peoples are simply biological nuances on the basic theme”.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, the concise, anthropomorphic account of creation in the First Chapter of Genesis accords with the findings of

biologists on evolutionary process: mineral (lines 1–10), vegetable (line 11), animal (lines 20–5) and humanity (line 26). Life itself is now estimated to have emerged near the beginning of Precambrian time, the first of twelve distinct periods of geological time, about 3.8 billion years ago.<sup>51</sup>

As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who defined faith as conscious knowledge expressed as virtuous deeds,<sup>52</sup> stated at a public talk in Paris in November 1911:

Religion and science are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism ...<sup>53</sup>

When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there will be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles – and then will mankind be united in the power of the Love of God.<sup>54</sup>

The restoration of the ancient harmony between religion and science, faith and reason (sensibilities, as it were, dissassociated since the Renaissance), the two complementary pathways which can lead to a clearer understanding and more intelligent and beneficial knowledge of reality, was spelt out by Max Planck and Albert Einstein, two pre-eminent and highly influential twentieth-century physicists:

Religion and natural science do not exclude each other, as many contemporaries of ours believe or fear; they mutually supplement and condition each other.

Religion without science is blind. Science without religion is lame.<sup>55</sup>

### **Some Blessèd Hope**

Fusing the subjective prerogatives of Romanticism with the sensitive analysing of the nation's health (or lack of it), Victorian poets, deeply conscious of their role as spokesmen, sought to occupy a middle-ground: stemming from his anguish at the death of Arthur Henry Hallam, his closest friend at Cambridge, at the age of 22, Tennyson's *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (published in 1850) also addressed the mounting crisis of faith and doubt besetting his public; moving in an episodic sequence from the poet's own numb grief and profound questioning at his friend's untimely death to final recovery of hope and faith in God's omnipresent Will in the "Epilogue," it became the most widely read poem in Victorian Britain, its popularity undoubtedly helped by Tennyson's status as Poet Laureate – and his sheer poetic skill.

If much Romantic poetry had been visionary, therapeutic, celebratory and, in the case of Blake, prescriptive, that of Victoria's reign was unabashedly nostalgic (e.g. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Browning's *A Toccata of Galluppi's*, Arnold's *The Scholar Gypsy*, Swinburne's *The Lake of Gaube*, many of Housman's lyrics) and often consolatory. Thus Arnold closed *Dover Beach* with pained, morbid resignation (the "ignorant armies" of the final line perhaps an allusion to the revolutions of 1848–9):

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night (28–37).

William Ernest Henley composed the much-anthologised *Invictus* (1875), its four elegant quatrains crystallising in archetypal imagery his fortitude under the crippling tuberculosis of the bone he had suffered:

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul (13–16).

In retrospect, the poet's dilemma was how, in a social milieu censured by Arnold for "its sick hurry / And divided aims" (*The Scholar Gypsy*, lines 203–04) and growing indifferent to anything but material comfort and satisfied with the guarantee of an ever-expanding Empire on which the sun would never set, he could in fact be master of his fate (nigh-impossible in any case) if, on the one hand, God played dice with His creation or, on the other, be master of his soul if he was so closely related to mere apes.

By far the most striking, if not altogether original, religious poetry of this later period is that which dramatises the individual's wrestle with God (the work of seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets Donne, Herbert and Vaughan constituting a notable precedent). Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* (1890–2) is a superb allegorical rendering in long, breathless stanzas of this inner turmoil, of his soul's petulant refusal to accept the benevolence and compassion vouchsafed by its Creator:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears



I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed slopes I sped;  
Adown Titantic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
But with unhurrying chase,  
And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat – and a Voice beat  
More instant than the Feet –  
“All things betray thee, who betrayest Me” (1–15).

Exhausted but still restless after “that long pursuit” (155), the errant Thompson, who had been addicted to opium and had lived in poverty in London for years, finally acquiesces:

“Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
I am He Whom Thou seekest!  
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me” (180–1).

The mature poetic career of Hopkins enacts in microcosm the shift from certitude to incertitude that occurred during the second half of Victoria’s reign, when Britain had established itself as the world’s foremost industrial, economic and colonial power. The sequence of sonnets celebrating nature as the intricate, awe-inspiring handiwork of God as observed in Wales and completed in 1877 (*The Starlight Night, Spring, Pied Beauty, The Windhover, Hurrahing in Harvest*), the year of his ordination, seems the more starkly radiant when juxtaposed with the “dark” or “terrible” sonnets written during Hopkins’s deeply unhappy tenure as professor of classics at University College, Dublin, four years before his premature death there at the age of 44 in 1889. Of this opus – edited and first published in book form by his friend and fellow poet, Robert Bridges, in 1918 – these late sonnets have subsequently been acclaimed the peak of his genius, so emblematic are they of the human being’s wilful separation from and, it would seem,

abandonment by God (“ ... my lament / Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away” – *I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, Not Day*), so uncannily prescient of both the existentialist angst, alienation and sense of absurdity and futility typified by much modernist literature and the clouds of despair with which the world’s horizon came to be shrouded in the wake of two global wars, the Great Depression, the Nazi Holocaust, the Great Purges in Stalin’s Soviet Union and the nuclear bombing of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the latter a signal instance of the moral choices available through the use or, indeed, misuse of one of the most sophisticated of all scientific technologies.

There then emerged the post-Victorian or modernist view that the individual – made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) and poised above the beasts but beneath the angels – as a single and unified whole, a stable entity, was no longer valid. Freud did much to promulgate this view. In 1900, while assistant professor of neuropathology at the University of Vienna, he published *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*). Dreams or nocturnal visions were to Freud windows on the subconscious mind, a singular blend of recent experiences (manifest content) and wish fulfilment (latent content). With proper analysis, the dream can be broken down into its component parts and interpreted to reveal long-suppressed desires, phobias, aspirations and fears. More could be learned by dissecting the not always rational workings of the mind and sublimated sexuality than from moralistic imperatives derived from Scripture and credal formulae<sup>56</sup> cloaked in mythology, superstition, fanaticism and ultimately barbarism (the Crusades, the Inquisition, Europe’s sixteenth-century religious wars, prevalent misogyny, millennia-long anti-Semitism that would culminate in the Holocaust): psychoanalysis and psychotherapy could succeed in identifying and healing neuroses where sacerdotalism and sacraments had failed.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the idealism so cherished by such Romantic poets as Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley succumbed to pragmatism, itself euphemistic of the brutal colonisation and domination of foreign lands and the exploitation of their “inferior” peoples; noble, practicable ideals of the eighteenth century – those of Democratic Justice and of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) respectively – were defaced by attitudes which were hegemonic, as evidenced in the lead taken by France and Britain to expand their colonies militarily in much of Africa during the 1880s. The promises of the American Revolution became blighted by racial discrimination towards, and segregation of, Native Americans and African-Americans (particularly in its secessionist Southern states in the case of the latter), and which would not be properly addressed at government level until the 1960s; those in France darkened into the Reign of Terror (1792) and, under Robespierre and Emperor Napoleon, a bloodstained “civilisation” predicated on the illusion of a Glorious Republic. The foundations of national, class and racial conflicts of the near future were laid or rather bolstered. Religious leaders perpetuated the misunderstandings and confusion perpetrated in the name of religion by failing to perceive the divine Educators of humanity’s “collective childhood as the agents of one civilising process”;<sup>57</sup> by stubbornly clinging to “unintelligent dogmas”,<sup>58</sup> they “erect[ed] artificial barriers between faith and reason”<sup>59</sup> which have largely persisted to the present. Imperialism, the offspring of millenarian motivations and energies, and the leitmotif of the second half of Victoria’s momentous reign of one quarter of the earth’s inhabitants, gained a deeper root throughout the world and loyalties to peace, justice and unity waxed and waned. Despite the historic interfaith fellowship inaugurated by the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, the early twentieth century was ripe for world war, particularly in Europe, which by then was primed for mass

destruction, as had been foreseen by Bahá'u'lláh when He observed to E.G. Browne in 1890: “Yet do we see your kings and rulers lavishing their treasures more freely on means for the destruction of the human race than on that which would conduce to the happiness of mankind ... ”.<sup>60</sup> The League of Nations, the prototype for both Tennyson’s “federation of the world” and the “mighty convocation”<sup>61</sup> of the world’s political and religious leaders prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh as a means of resolving international conflict, was formed only after the involvement of over 30 nations and 90 per cent of the earth’s population in warfare and the deaths of at least 10 million men and the wounding of 21 million, with tens of thousands of soldiers slaughtered in the space of only days during the three stages of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916.

The bleakness of the end of the year and of the nineteenth century was deftly evoked by Thomas Hardy in *The Darkling Thrush*:

The land’s sharp features seemed to be  
The century’s corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.  
The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I (9–16).

Listening to the “happy good-night air” (line 30) of “an aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small” (line 21), the poet is “unaware” of “Some blessèd Hope” (line 31). With so much strife, uncertainty, alienation, violence, terrorism, greed, corruption, dehumanisation, dysfunction and misery engendered by the erosion of transcendence and the deification of a callow, hedonistic individualism and a rampant, enervating materialism – characterised in the West by a rabid consumerism and the divorce of values from facts (which has left in its wake moral,

social and intellectual bankruptcy) – the key word for many then, as now, was “hope.” However fleeting or illusory, this hope was that, though the vitality of belief in God and of His religion as an efficacious social paradigm was being corroded in every land, humanity, the finest fruit of a majestic evolution stretching back billions of years, could yet be renewed. In the words of Bahá’u’lláh:

The whole earth is now in a state of pregnancy. The day is approaching when it will have yielded its noblest fruits, when from it will have sprung forth the loftiest trees, the most enchanting blossoms, the most heavenly blessings  
...<sup>62</sup>

1991–2002

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# **Ireland's Multi-Ethnic Immigration Challenge: An Irish Bahá'í View by Eamonn Moane**

## **Abstract**

*Ireland's dramatic economic success in recent years has led to a new phenomenon in Irish life, that of immigrants from outside the EU or USA wanting to come and live here. In view of Ireland's own experience of mass emigration over the past two centuries, the country's reaction to multi-ethnic immigration has been disappointing. Ireland should adopt policies that are generous, fair, and transparent. Its approach should be based on moral principle, an understanding of the processes at work in the world, and recognition of the potentially enriching effects of immigration. It is essential that there be open and honest debate on the immigration issue, free of the one-sided ideology of "political correctness" which some lobby groups seek to impose on the debate of, and solutions to, the challenge. Adopting the Bahá'í approach to consultation and race relations would, alone, be a major contribution to dealing with the issue.*

## **Introduction**

In the seven years from 1994 to 2000, Ireland experienced an economic transformation unprecedented in its history. The economy grew at 8% per annum by conservative calculations, a cumulative growth of some 70%. The defining feature of this economic transformation has been the phenomenal increase of almost 50% in the numbers at work in the country. Gross national product per person, a crude measure of economic well-being, increased from 70% of the EU average to about 100%. Although the growth rate has slowed appreciably since the middle of 2001, reflecting the world economic slowdown, it is still higher than in most countries and the numbers at work in Ireland have continued to increase.<sup>1</sup>

The vastly improved economic and employment situation has brought about something totally new to Ireland. Firstly, tens of thousands of diverse peoples from poor non-EU countries have come to work here with work permits for specific periods obtained in advance by their employers. Secondly, and more controversially, tens of thousands more have come here as economic migrants and asylum-seekers without such work permits, and have applied for asylum. It is mainly with the second group that this paper deals.

### **Historical Perspective**

For most of the two centuries or so from the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 to the early 1990s, Ireland's agriculturally based economy was unable to provide sufficient jobs for its people. Involuntary mass emigration became a permanent feature of Irish life and culture. The calamitous Potato Famine of the 1840s and the mass emigration in its aftermath were particularly traumatic. Several million emigrated during the 19th century, and over 1 million emigrated between independence in the early 1920s, and the early 1990s, particularly in the 1950s (when 400,000 left) and the 1980s (when 250,000 left). The population of the area now constituting the Republic in the early 1840s was about 6.5 million, but at independence in the early 1920s, it was only just over 3.0 million. The 1961 census showed the population had fallen to a modern historic low of 2.8 million, although by 1991, it had recovered to some 3.5 million. By 2001, it had reached over 3.8 million.<sup>2</sup>

In the early 1920s, the number at work in Ireland was about 1.2 million. 70 years later in the early 1990s, it was virtually unchanged. Yet by the end of 2001, almost 1.8 million were at work. Such a 50% increase in eight years is almost unprecedented anywhere during normal peacetime.

This caused unemployment to fall from over 15% in the early 1990s to less than 4% in early 2001, although it has edged up slightly in the last year.<sup>3</sup> It resulted in the – hopefully

permanent – ending of mass unemployment and involuntary emigration that has been a feature of Irish society and culture for much of the past two centuries.

Since the mid-1990s, the country has changed from one of substantial net emigration to substantial net immigration. The greatest component of immigrants was returning Irish emigrants. In the past few years, tens of thousands of short-term work permits were issued to nationals of many countries where Irish employers showed they were not able to recruit EU workers. In addition, in a new development, over the six years from 1996 to 2001, some 37,000 applications for asylum and residence were received from persons outside the EU or USA, mainly from such countries as Nigeria, Rumania, the Congo and Algeria.<sup>4</sup>

Up to then, Ireland's experience of asylum applications was limited to numbers in the hundreds – Hungarians in 1956, Vietnamese in the 1970s, Iranian Bahá'ís in 1985, and Bosnians in the 1990s. It granted these people refugee status due to its obligations under the 1951 International Convention on Refugees. This defined refugees in "political" terms, as those fleeing persecution on grounds of race, nationality, religion, social group or political opinion. It did not include "economic" refugees fleeing poverty, famine, natural disaster or war. The State has always adhered to the strict 1951 definition of a refugee.

Of course, mass movement and migration of large numbers of people, voluntary or involuntary, has been a dominant feature of human history. Present-day North and South America and Australia have been built by mass immigration in recent centuries, but at terrible cost to their indigenous populations. However, relative to its home population, the sheer scale of Ireland's emigration and resulting population decline throughout much of the last two centuries has been almost unprecedented in the world. This is particularly so if one bears in mind that, since the second half of the nineteenth century, Ireland has usually ranked

economically among the world's rich countries, even if the poorest of those rich. A huge Irish diaspora of tens of millions exists, mainly in North America, Australia and England. Except perhaps for England, the Irish abroad have been very successful materially and have made enormous contributions to their adopted countries.

### **Ireland's Response to Multi-Ethnic Immigration**

In view of this unique historical experience of emigration, and the recent dramatic improvement in our economic fortunes, one might expect that we in Ireland would be particularly sensitive and compassionate to multi-ethnic, non-EU immigrants, other than those coming on a work permit, wanting to come here. One might assume that as a people we would openly and unhesitatingly accept that we were faced with a grave moral and practical dilemma, and would be openly engaging with and debating the issue in a soul-searching manner. After all, the 37,000 applying for asylum and residence here between 1996 and 2001 amounted to one per cent of the existing population, lower than in many other countries. As recently as the late 1980s, Irish Government ministers and officials were pleading with the United States to relax its immigration regulations and to legalise the situation of the tens of thousands of illegal Irish immigrants into the States during the 1980s.

To be fair, the Irish reaction to the new immigrants has not been ugly, let alone violent. Neither has it been, until the introduction of "direct provision" in 2001, humiliating financially. In fact, immigrants want to apply for asylum here precisely because of the relatively generous social welfare and safety net provided, and the fact that Ireland is one of the few countries that automatically grant citizenship to all children born here, irrespective of the circumstances. The response from the religious leaders, sections of the media, and various organisations, has been compassionate and generous.

However, the response from the generality of Irish people can be described as small-minded and mean-spirited,

ambivalent and hesitant, but above all, largely devoid of moral principal or historical perspective. This is particularly true of the political leadership, which, of course, merely reflects popular opinion. Any moves towards accepting immigrants and allowing them to work here have been dictated mainly by expediency and the labour needs of a rapidly growing economy. In view of our own recent past, our reaction to the immigration issue is a shameful reflection of the moral and intellectual wasteland into which the society has been heading in the unprecedented material prosperity of the last eight years.

Surely as a society of mass emigration for two centuries we should regard immigration as a positive compliment reflecting Ireland's changed fortunes, and be pleased that it will enrich and diversify us, as elsewhere, in the very same way that the millions of Irish emigrants have enriched their host countries. Instead, we appear to be fearful of even very limited multicultural immigration as a threat to our economic well-being and cultural identity. Indeed, could one reason for the changing sentiment to the EU and its enlargement, as evidenced in the rejection of the Nice referendum proposals in June 2001, be the prospect of large numbers of East European immigrants eventually coming here?

There are reasons for Ireland's disappointing response to the immigration issue. First, because of history and geography, the Republic of Ireland since independence has been, ethnically, religiously and culturally, an unusually homogeneous society, unused to genuine diversity. It has been a society of conservative thinking, and of consensus and conformity, lacking a tradition of intellectual discourse and mature debate. From the mid-19th century until at least the 1960s, as part of asserting our national identity, we chose as the dominant ethos of society a dogmatic, triumphalist and authoritarian form of Roman Catholicism which discouraged independent thinking and initiative. In the closing decades of the 20th century, the dominant ethos has been an equally dogmatic, if not intolerant, politically correct secular liberalism

devoid of any true spiritual vision, which, as elsewhere, seeks to exclude all aspects of religion, transcendence and spiritual values from the public discourse.

Second, continuing mass emigration over the generations had a deadening affect on the country's social and intellectual life and made Irish people wary of foreign people taking scarce jobs. The resulting conservative ethos perpetuated a conservative, somewhat ossified society where, until recent decades, one's possessions rather than ability determined one's social status.

Third, it is an unfortunate widespread phenomenon that people who have been the underdog for much of their history, when they cease to be so, do not show much sympathy to other underprivileged people. Excluding the core of missionaries and aid workers, the record of the Irish diaspora abroad, in their attitudes to race and to underprivileged peoples, has frequently been far from honourable.

### **A Broad Bahá'í Perspective**

A Bahá'í approach to Ireland's multi-ethnic immigration issue would be based on moral and spiritual principle, and on a global perspective. It would be based on the acceptance that the unity and interdependence of the human race – the pivotal social teaching of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation – is now being established as the result of divinely ordained historical processes at work in the world. These are pushing its peoples inevitably towards world unity and a world commonwealth. Abdu'l-Bahá stated that in this age, the unity of mankind could, for the first time in history, be achieved, and he envisaged that one stage of this, the unity of nations or peoples, would be established in the 20th century:

... The fifth candle is the unity of nations – a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland.<sup>5</sup>

Shoghi Effendi wrote in 1936:

Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successfully attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal to which a harassed humanity is striving.<sup>6</sup>

It would also emphasise the concept of global citizenship, and the common equality and dignity of all peoples, with its implications for human rights, as exemplified in the following Hidden Word of Bahá'u'lláh:

O Children of Men! Know ye not why We created ye all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how you were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.<sup>7</sup>

Advocating race harmony and unity, and working to overcome racism, follow from the above. As the Bahá'í International Community stated in 2001:

Racism originates not in the skin but in the human mind ... At the root of all forms of discrimination and intolerance is the erroneous idea that humankind is somehow composed of separate and distinct races, peoples or castes, and that these sub-groups innately possess varying intellectual, moral, and/or physical capacities, which in turn justify different forms of treatment. The reality is that there is only one human



race. We are a single people, inhabiting the planet earth, one human family bound together in a common destiny, a single entity created from the one same substance, obligated to “be even as one soul.”

The reality of human oneness is fully endorsed by science. Anthropology, physiology, sociology and, most recently, genetics, in its decoding of the human genome, demonstrate that there is only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life.<sup>8</sup>

A Bahá’í approach would also would advocate global economic and social policies aimed at removing the underlying causes of involuntary mass migration that have resulted in 150 million migrant workers with immediate dependants,<sup>9</sup> and some 22 million officially recognised refugees,<sup>10</sup> in the world. This would obviously include working for world peace and for an end to conflict, and for a minimum code of human rights to be applied everywhere. It would also include economic policies aimed at eliminating the extremes of wealth and poverty, and the endemic hopeless poverty afflicting huge masses of people globally. The mass migration in today’s world is one of the symptoms of the wider crisis of intolerable economic inequality and poverty destabilising the world.

### **A Practical Bahá’í Approach**

As recommended by the Roman Catholic hierarchy in 2000, Ireland should give an amnesty to, and regularise the situation of, asylum-seeker immigrants already here, unless they have committed serious offences. It should then adopt a quota-based immigration system with open and transparent regulations and procedures. This should accept a generous and fair number of immigrants into the country, allow them work as their application is considered, give them full citizenship, and develop systematic programmes for their reception and integration. The USA is a good example. Whatever the numbers it accepts, the procedures for residency, work, and

eventual full citizenship, are clear and transparent, even if rigorously enforced. The same standards and procedures apply to all. Immigrants should then be expected to obey the law of the land – an important Bahá'í principle. Ireland should do these things for a number of reasons.

First, it is the right thing to do. Because of our historical experience with emigration, we have a moral obligation, now that we have become materially successful, to be generous to others seeking a materially better life.

Second, humanity is moving towards a world commonwealth and a global civilisation and culture, based on unity in diversity, and Ireland cannot escape the implications of this.

Third, our homogeneous insular society would benefit from an influx of culturally diverse peoples. Here it is perhaps worth remembering that the acceptance in 1985 of Bahá'í refugees from the persecutions in Iran greatly enriched both the Irish Bahá'í community and the wider Irish communities in which they settled. Experience worldwide shows that, in the long run, immigrants enrich the societies that accept them. The enriching effects of human diversity are vividly depicted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Consider the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet inasmuch as they are refreshed by the water of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty ... How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruits and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and colour! Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when diverse shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty

and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth all things, is capable of harmonising the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men.<sup>11</sup>

In light of the above, we should not merely tolerate or accept or even welcome diversity; we should celebrate it as one of the major signs of God in the world. However, it is also clear from the last sentence above that it is only the Word of God that can, in the long run, provide the overarching value system necessary to allow genuine diversity to flourish.

Finally, even on the most pragmatic grounds, immigrants have helped, and would continue to help, the economy to function more smoothly.

Ireland, as a rich country that was not a coloniser, still enjoys a measure of prestige and goodwill in the international community that is out of proportion to its real economic or political or even military power. It should use its influence in world affairs to advocate radical structural solutions that will mitigate and eliminate the poverty, conflict and human rights violations that are the root causes of involuntary mass movement of peoples. It should advocate the concepts of global citizenship, consciousness and identity that will bring this about. In the meantime, until the long-term problem is resolved, it could also propose adopting an international code of policy and conduct on immigration whereby countries would agree to accept generous but just quotas of immigrants depending on their population size and economic wealth. Indeed, such policies could be regarded as a form of international economic aid and assistance.

Political, religious and social leaders should initiate and foster a process of genuine consultation, discussion and debate on the immigrant issue, devoid of ideological polemics, the pre-set agendas of vested interest groups, and the adversarial method of policy and decision-making. This should be based

on ascertaining the facts, identifying the principles and coming up with a correct solution. In fact, this is arguably the most difficult step, and is dealt with below.

There should be agreement not to stir up the immigration issue in a sensational, scare-mongering manner for partisan political reasons. The apparent tacit acceptance of this in the 2002 general election campaign underway in Ireland at the time of this writing, in which immigration has been hardly mentioned, is welcome. While less preferable than dealing with our immigration challenge in an open, mature and principled manner, it is certainly preferable to making it a divisive, ugly and indeed dangerous political issue.

In immediate practical terms, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has set forth the Bahá’í standard in our attitude and reactions to individual immigrants and asylum-seekers – that of loving– kindness while giving them the benefit of any doubts or reservations we may have:

I ask you not to think only of yourselves. Be kind to the strangers, whether they come from Turkey, Japan, Persia, Russia, China or any other country in the world. Help to make them feel at home; find out where they are staying, ask if you may render them any service; try to make their lives a little happier. In this way, even if, sometimes, what you first suspected should be true, still go out of your way to be kind to them – this kindness will help them to become better. After all, why should foreign people be treated as strangers?

Let those who meet you know, without your proclaiming the fact, that you are indeed a Bahá’í. Put into practice the teaching of Bahá’u’lláh, that of kindness to all nations. Do not be content with showing friendship in words alone, let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path.<sup>12</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to see in the face of the vulnerable His own face:

O Son of Man! Deny not My servant should he ask anything from thee, for his face is My face; be then abashed before Me.<sup>13</sup>

### **From Political Correctness to True Consultation**

Unfortunately, as with the Traveller issue, the “Refugee and Asylum-Seeker” issue tends to be hijacked by vociferous though well-meaning individuals and groups who seek to impose a “politically correct” victim culture approach to the problem. By labelling as “racist” those who raise certain questions, use certain words, or suggest that immigrants (and Travellers) also have to play their part in resolving the problems arising, they prevent a proper discussion of the challenge. In that sense they actually contribute to the problem. They create an atmosphere in which the issues cannot be frankly debated and in which people feel embarrassed and intimidated about talking freely. This has the effect of repressing the problem and contributing to the growth of negative and racist sentiment directed against these vulnerable groups. In this regard, the growing level of support in Europe for political parties advocating such views (as in France) should be a warning.

An example of the effects of political correctness is the misuse of the very expressions, “refugee” and “asylum-seeker.” Those coming here from poor countries without work permits have little choice but to apply for asylum and refugee status. Yet the majority of such applicants are in fact economic migrants seeking to better their material lives, in the same way as countless millions, including millions of Irish people, have done in recent centuries. Therefore from the time of their arrival and dealing with officialdom here, pretence, confusion and ambiguity exist on both sides, which can lead only to future problems. Truth and honesty in words, and fair and

open policies and procedures, would go a long way towards resolving the issue. Hence the deliberate use of the word “immigration” in the title of this paper.

Another example of political correctness is the frequent reaction when the question of limiting the numbers of asylum-seeking immigrants is raised. Even hinting at this very immediate and legitimate question can be deemed “racist.” Yet can anybody seriously and credibly advocate such uncontrolled immigration? Certainly the Republic of Ireland, with a population of 3.8 million and with 1.8 million people at work, could accept something of the order of, say, 10,000 asylum seekers per annum. But 100,000, or 1 million, per annum? Merely phrasing the question like this shows how absurd it is to advocate unlimited immigration, and to denounce as “racist” those who disagree.

Yet another example is the chorus of accusations of “racism” when sensitive issues are raised, or when the law or common sense standards are applied to immigrants or Travellers in the same way as to the general population. In fact, words like “racism” and “racist” are now amongst the most used, misused and abused words in public discourse. Yet racism is essentially the belief that certain groups of people of different ethnic backgrounds are inherently inferior to others. Prejudice means pre-judging, holding unjustified views about others without informed thought. These words should not be used to automatically label justified, well-informed concerns, questions or opinions that one may have about others.

For example, is it “racist xenophobia” if residents express concern when relatively large numbers of immigrants are settled in their area? Is it “racial discrimination” to express concern about the numbers of women arriving in Ireland in advanced states of pregnancy to ensure that their babies born here can obtain Irish citizenship? Is it blind “racist prejudice” if parents, perhaps misguided, express their concern that their children’s education might be adversely affected by the

presence of relatively large numbers of immigrants, or Travellers, in certain classes?

Like it or not, issues such as these have to be discussed and resolved in any society that wants to manage multi-ethnic immigration and cultural diversity successfully. Dealing with these sensitive and complex issues demands a high level of moral maturity, courage, tact and sympathy. Perhaps a major contribution that the Bahá'ís, despite their small numbers, can make to the multi-ethnic challenge is the Bahá'í process of genuine consultation, based on spiritual principles and the sincere desire to find the correct solution. This involves being frank but cordial in the consultation, regarding ideas as belonging to the group and not to the individual who first proposes them, and the participation of those affected by any decisions arrived at. The Bahá'í International Community elaborated on this process in 1994:

The standard of truth seeking this process demands is far beyond the patterns of negotiation and compromise that tend to characterize the present-day discussion of human affairs. It cannot be achieved – indeed, its attainment is severely handicapped – by the culture that is another widely prevailing feature of contemporary society. Debate, propaganda, the adversarial method, the entire apparatus of partisanship that have long been such familiar features of collective action, are all fundamentally harmful to its purpose: that is, arriving at a consensus about the truth of a given situation and the wisest choice of action among the options at any given moment.

What Bahá'u'lláh is calling for is a consultative process in which the individual participants strive to transcend their respective points of view, in order to function as members of a body with its own interests and goals. In such an atmosphere, characterised by both candour and courtesy, ideas belong not to the individual

to whom they occur during the discussion but to the group as a whole, to take up, discard or revise as seems to best serve the goal pursued ...

Viewed in such a light, consultation is the operating expression of justice in human affairs. So vital is it to the success of collective endeavour that it must constitute a basic feature of a viable strategy of social and economic development. Indeed, the participation of the people on whose commitment and efforts the success of such a strategy depends becomes effective only as consultation is made the organising principle of every project.<sup>14</sup>

The Bahá'í writings are clear that both sides must play their part in solving the problems arising from racial and ethnic discrimination and prejudice. What Shoghi Effendi wrote to the American Bahá'í community in 1938 about the challenge of racial prejudice is apt today:

Let neither think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved ... Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left ...<sup>15</sup>

### **Recent Developments**

Two recent developments give further cause for concern on the immigration issue. The first is the systematic application, in 2001, of “direct provision” for immigrants claiming to be asylum-seekers. The new system supersedes the previous system of social welfare payments and benefits, and rent supplements, available for all Irish citizens. It provides the immigrants with free full-board accommodation in hostels and bed and breakfast places, together with very modest pocket



money for personal items, of £20 (€25.39 cent) per week for adults and £10 (€12.70 cent) for children. This arrangement holds when the immigrants' application for refugee status is being considered, and they are not allowed to work in the meantime. Such a system is demoralising, humiliating and distressing for the immigrants, and this appears to be its intention. Sadly, Irish public opinion as a whole is not unduly concerned. Imagine the reaction here if this approach was applied to illegal Irish emigrants in the USA or any other country!

Second, over the past year it has become clear that the exceptional era of the Celtic Tiger economic boom has ended, with the economic growth rate slowing down considerably from 10% to 3–4%, and the public finances deteriorating rapidly. Unemployment has risen marginally from 3.7% to 4.3%, and is expected to rise further, although the numbers at work are expected to hold up. There is little now of the kind of talk heard in 2000 about the need for 200,000 immigrant workers between 2000 and 2006 to meet the needs of the economy, half of whom would not be returning Irish emigrants! This poses the challenge of preventing an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment.

Another issue in particular poses a further challenge to our attitude to all non-EU immigrants. Are we to regard them in the same way as Irish workers, or just pragmatically as a “safety valve” for the economy, with work permits granted and withdrawn at the dictates of the economic cycle and the forces of economic globalisation? Are we to systematically discriminate between those immigrants with the skills needed by the economy, and the more vulnerable economic migrants and asylum-seekers without such skills? There are disturbing signs that we are opting for the purely pragmatic and discriminatory approach. Besides being utterly cynical and immoral, such a policy of discrimination would do irreparable damage to Ireland's international reputation.

## **Conclusion**

Multi-ethnic immigration has provided a special challenge to Ireland, and its response has been disappointing, if not disturbing. Most worrying, perhaps, has been not so much our response to the challenge, but the shameless lack of moral principle and historical perspective in our attitude. Our response, given our history, has been that of a people who are insecure, afraid of diversity, and ruthlessly determined to hold onto our new-found economic wealth. This is despite the admirable record of Irish missionaries and aid workers broad, and the notable generosity of Irish people in contributing to international Irish aid agencies and charities.

To face this challenge, Ireland needs the moral vision and global historical perspective to foster the correct attitude and implement just and transparent policies. The Bahá'í view of this issue, and the consultative approach it offers to finding a solution, can provide the Irish people with the vision, perspective and courage to face up to the multi-ethnic immigration challenge in a generous, just and exemplary manner in the years ahead.

November 2001 – May 2002

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# **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.

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