

The Oneness of Reality: A Response to Moojan Momen's "Relativism as a Basis for Baha'i Metaphysics"

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2018

The purpose of this essay is to initiate a dialogue on epistemology and ontology as presented in the core literature of the Baha'i religion among students of that field, academic and non-academic, emic and etic. As long as only one perspective has been articulated and published, and other voices are unheard and unknown, dialogue cannot take place. Dr. Moojan Momen wrote a paper, entitled "*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics*," which was published in Studies in Honor of the late Hasan M. Balyuzi. That paper sets forth a position (reflected in its title) that has gone unchallenged for thirty years. For decades the author of this "Response" was inclined to critique Dr. Momen's paper, but out of respect for his well-known and highly esteemed body of published work, the rarity and frequently contentious nature of dialogues on theological issues in the field of Baha'i studies, the disinterest which met his response from publishers, and his intimate awareness of his own limitations as a discussant of such matters, the present author repeatedly postponed translating his intentions into action. The time has arrived, and he hopes that a dialogue will ensue.

Dr. Momen begins his paper by citing a comment of Edward Granville Browne (Professor of Persian and later of Arabic Literature at Cambridge University, from 1888 to 1926) regarding the Bahá'í Faith: "...there is little in the corpus of

works about that faith that can be described as systematic theological or metaphysical writing." Considering that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote tens of thousands of Tablets, and that many of their Tablets specifically treated theological or metaphysical questions, this is an extraordinarily ill-informed statement for Professor Browne to have made, demonstrating his unfamiliarity with a vast range of the literature associated with a religion that he studied and wrote about for decades. Among the Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that treat of such subjects are the *Tablet of the Universe*, the *Tablet to Dr. Forel*, and the *Tablet on the Unity of Existence*. Furthermore, included among the most widely disseminated collections of Bahá'í literature are the English translations of the talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the West, entitled Paris Talks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, and The Promulgation of Universal Peace. These talks contain a wealth of discussion on theological and metaphysical questions. This is especially true of the collection entitled Some Answered Questions, which explains not only Bahá'í teachings but also passages related to Jewish (Hebrew) and Christian (Greek) Scripture and to specific Christian doctrines. All of these collections of talks were published prior to Professor Browne's demise.

If Professor Browne was anticipating that Bahá'ís would have developed the theological themes present in the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá into a systematic theology in the style of the medieval Christian scholastics (or even of the Church Fathers) or the medieval Muslim mutakalimun, he likewise showed poor judgment, in this case an unrealistic expectation in view of the historical record for other religions. When Professor Browne made the statement cited by Dr. Momen, only two decades (or less) had passed since the decease of the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. The Christian canon had not been formalized two decades after the passing of Jesus Christ. It was not until some centuries later that the first systematic Christian theology was composed.

Lastly we must ask what possible purpose a systematic theology would have served the followers of Bahá'u'lláh during the lifetime of Professor Browne, when living in their midst, until 1892, was Baha'u'llah, the Founder of their religion, and, until 1921, the the interpreter and expounder of the Bahá'í teachings appointed by Bahá'u'lláh? As Hasan M. Balyuzi has shown in his book on Professor Browne, this brilliant scholar and eloquent writer was often misinformed and unbalanced in his judgment of the Bahá'í Faith, perhaps motivated by political and other extra-academic considerations. This appears to

be one more instance of a biased and mistaken judgment.

As Dr. Momen notes, "...the unity of religions is one of the key doctrines of the Bahá'í Faith." This is attested by all authors in the field of Baha'i studies, however, the Bahá'í doctrine of the unity of religions has often been misunderstood. That is, many students of this religion have not read sufficiently from the Bahá'í canon to have grasped the true meaning of this teaching, and many not have clearly distinguished this doctrine from the many competing doctrines which have been directly contradicted in the Bahá'í Writings. Bahá'í theology is not more or less "up for grabs." Whether from an emic or etic perspective, the authoritative Bahá'í teachings are those which are articulated by Bahá'u'lláh, explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and/or Shoghi Effendi. The views of recognized members of the Baha'i community, who are usually called "Baha'is", are not authoritative in any way, representing only their personal views. Hence, the views expressed by Dr. Momen as well as the present author are those of individuals, and not authoritative in any sense. The author will attempt to present the primary source materials, which speak for themselves and do not admit of unlimited flexibility, in his view. Whether the reader comes to share that point of view will of course depend upon his own judgment.

The unity of religion as taught in the Bahá'í canon asserts the unity of God, the unity of the Manifestations of God, the essential unity of the religion of God, the unity of the creation of God, and the unity of mankind. Passages from the writings of Baha'u'llah and utterances of 'Abdu'l-Baha have been cited in the footnotes, and many others could be referenced. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have explained that the Manifestations are one, are unified in their spiritual station, and that they have a human station of particularity which pertains to each one of them as well. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also stated that the religion of God has two parts--one which is eternal and unchangeable, and the other which is subject to modifications according to the conditions of time and place and, in particular, the spiritual maturity of mankind. The religion of God is one in the sense that it comes from one God, and through the agency of a superhuman being, variously called the Avatara, the Buddha, the Prophet, the Son, the Messenger, the Point and the Manifestation, each clothed in a distinctive personality, bearing a distinctive message. The religion of God is also one in that its essential, its primordial and perennial teachings are not subject to

change from age to age. Furthermore, inasmuch as the development of humanity is progressive, the Baha'i Faith recognizes that the message of each successive Holy One is also progressive, and it uses the term "progressive revelation" to refer to the progressive unfoldment of the essential teachings of religion as well as to the revelation of secondary teachings which are appropriate to each stage in the progressive evolution of humankind.

Dr. Momen states that "...this doctrine...appears to work well enough when applied to the different religions in the Western Judaeo-Christian-Muslim tradition" but that "problems arise, however, when the theory is applied to other religious systems, in particular the Eastern systems: Indian, Chinese, and Japanese religion. In these systems there is frequently no concept of a Creator God, of prophethood, or of the revelation of a holy law and divine teachings."

There are lots of problems with this statement. Let us begin with the affirmation that the Baha'i Faith does not address the religious claims of every faith tradition, but that it does recognize those of Hinduism and Buddhism, and to a lesser degree those of Confucianism. Many of the "Eastern systems" to which Dr. Momen refers are derived from or influenced by one or more of these three religious traditions. Hence, the Baha'i claim is unconditional with regard to these religions - they have all of the essential characteristics of what Dr. Momen calls the "Western Judaeo-Christian-Muslim tradition", which is a theoretical construct, inasmuch as all three of these religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - originated in the Middle East and not the West. Furthermore, only two of the three were established in the West in such fashion as to remain to this day, Judaism and Christianity, and it is only these two which are cited in the West in connection with Judaeo-Christian values and traditions. The Baha'i claim is much more universal than this construct. It posits a religious unity that embraces the entire planet, not only for the future, but throughout the entire course of human existence.

One could quibble with Dr. Momen's choice of terminology. The doctrine of progressive revelation is not, irrespective of one's point of view, a "theory," nor is it properly speaking a "doctrine"--it is portrayed in the Baha'i sources as simply put, a truth. This is an important distinction, because imprecision in the use of language can lead to imprecision in thinking, and ultimately to erroneous

conclusions.

Secondly, as was pointed out initially, the Baha'i sources indicate that there is no difference between what Dr. Momen calls "the Western tradition" and what he describes as "the Eastern systems"--that the Founders of all of these religions are all Messengers from God to humanity.

Thirdly, it is a misnomer to identify these systems as "Western" and "Eastern" inasmuch as all of the Manifestations of God have arisen in the East--this has been repeatedly affirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. While Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism flourished principally in the places of their origin and to the East and South, while Judaism, Christianity and Islam spread predominantly to the West of their places of origin, the interpenetration of these religious systems has had cultural consequences that are integral to the histories of all peoples, East and West. For example, there are the hundreds of millions of Muslims who live in East and Asia, and the inroads of Buddhism to the Middle East in the Middle Ages and of Hinduism and Buddhism alike in the Modern Era.

Fourthly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written and Shoghi Effendi has confirmed that the original writings of Krishna and Buddha are lost, and that most of what goes by the name of these religions reflects the vain imaginings of human interpretation rather than the truth of God. They have also asserted that the essential teachings of these two Holy Souls were entirely in conformity with those revealed by Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

Fifthly, the "avatara" concept (and particularly the "pradurbhava" precept that may have preceded it), which reaches its fulfilment in Krishna, is in many regards similar to the Bahá'í definition of "Manifestation"--and both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi have explicitly indicated that Krishna in particular was a Manifestation of God. Likewise, the Buddha concept, as expressed in some Buddhist literature--those works which apply this station to Gotama (Siddhartha) Buddha, to unnamed Buddhas which preceded Him and to Maitreya Who is to succeed Him (rather than those which apply this station potentially to every person who will renounce the world and seek nirvana)--is also consonant with

the Bahá'í concept of Manifestation. While many Hindu and Buddhist doctrines differ from Bahá'í doctrines, there is more ground for agreement between the traditions as they presently stand than is currently appreciated by most observers and adherents. This common ground is, not surprisingly, to be found in the realm of essential religious teachings, a subject to which the author will return repeatedly in this "Response", and which has been described in great detail by Bhagavan Das.

Certainly there are religious systems which do not conform to the definition of the true religion of God which is described in the Bahá'í Writings. The human religions which are not recognized by the Central Figures and Guardian of the Bahá'í Dispensation include the Hindu cults of Ganesh, Shiva, Durga, Kali and many other gods and goddesses; Taoism and Confucianism as currently practiced (the religious aspects only are mentioned in this connection); Jainism, Taoism, Shinto, and many NRMs (new religious movements). Indeed, there are thousands of religious traditions worldwide which are not recognized in the Bahá'í canon as existing under the umbrella of the religion of God. The fact is that Bahá'u'lláh does not include all religious phenomena in His definition of the religion of God. The true religion of the true God is His concern. The Bahá'í canon clearly asserts that the Founders of Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were Universal Manifestations of God. Nor has Bahá'u'lláh taught that every school, every branch of the true religions of God is rightly guided and accurately reflects the intentions of its Founder.

Dr. Momen states, "There are religious traditions that point towards a monistic universe, where there is no essential difference between the self of man and the Absolute. This line of thought is pursued mainly in the Eastern religious systems such as the Hinduism of Shankara, some forms of Mahayana Buddhism, and Sufism of the wahdat al-wujud school." As indicated earlier, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi asserted that the true teachings of Krishna and Buddha have been lost, but that the essential teachings of both of these Manifestations of God must have been in agreement with the essential teachings of the other Prophets. Hence, the "Eastern religious systems such as the Hinduism of Shankara" and "some forms of Mahayana Buddhism" referred to by Dr. Momen must be weighed in the balance of the extant and authenticated Scriptures of other Universal Manifestations of God. It should be noted that in *Kitab-i-Iqan*

Bahá'u'lláh contradicts the statements of those Sufis who claimed to be able to know the essence of God, one of the characteristics of the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud (called monism by Dr. Momen); who disapproves of "mystics who bear allegiance to the Faith of Islam" who have "set aside the differences of station and have come to regard themselves as God, while God is immeasurably exalted above all things"; of those who "layeth claim to inner knowledge, and still deeper knowledge concealed within this knowledge" and those who practice "austerities and mortifications" but who do not conform to the good-pleasure of God; of "certain foolish ones" who maintain that all created things are "peers and partners of God Himself"; and "let none construe these utterances to be anthropomorphism, nor see in them the descent of the worlds of God into the grades of the creatures; nor should they lead thine Eminence to such assumptions". He also answers an enquirer with "thy reference to the existence of two Gods. Beware, beware, lest thou be led to join partners with the Lord, thy God. He is, and hath from everlasting been, one and alone, without peer or equal, eternal in the past, eternal in the future"; and "He is really a believer in the Unity of God who recognizeth in each and every created thing the sign of the revelation of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, and not he who maintaineth that the creature is indistinguishable from the Creator."

'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks out against the monist positions of Theosophists, Sufis, Druse and Nusayris alike in Some Answered Questions and in one of His Tablets He speaks of a community of believers, without identifying them, who worship a figment of their imagination: "This people, all of them, have pictured a god in the realm of the mind, and worship that image which they have made for themselves." Nor does 'Abdu'l-Bahá restrict Himself to debunking monism--He also reinterprets the Trinity in a manner that would scandalize most Christians. Both He and Bahá'u'lláh emphatically deny the incarnation of Prophets, articulated most unequivocally by Shoghi Effendi, much to the consternation no doubt of many followers of Jesus and Krishna. They also deny that the title "Seal of the Prophets" indicates that Muhammad will not be followed by another Messenger of God--which does not appeal to most Muslims.

It is clear from reading only these few passages, that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have specifically and emphatically discredited the monist ontological position. What is not as well appreciated is that neither Bahá'u'lláh nor 'Abdu'l-

Bahá approved of the dualist position either, inasmuch as it omits the intermediary between God and His Creation--the Manifestation of God. In many passages of His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh depicts a paradigm of three conditions of existence, many of which have been translated into English. Likewise, 'Abdu'l-Bahá elucidates this teaching of Bahá'u'lláh in authenticated sources, which are also available in English. Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi furthermore stated that this is one of the essential and unchanging teachings of religion, revealed by all the Prophets of God. The author has cited all of these passages and many others related to the subject in a separate paper. However, for the convenience of the present reader, two sequences which confirm this paradigm are cited here:

"Know that the conditions of existence are limited to the conditions of servitude [martabat-i-'ibadiyyat], of prophethood [martabat-i-nubuwwat], and of Deity [martabat-i-rabubiyyat], but the divine and the contingent perfections are unlimited."

"The Prophets, on the contrary, believe that there is the world of God ['alam-i-haqq], the world of the Kingdom ['alam-i-malakut], and the world of Creation ['alam-i-khalq]: three things."

"Abdu'l-Bahá says that the main difference between the gnostics and the religionists is that the gnostics maintain the existence of only two worlds, the world of God and the world of the creature. The prophets, however, maintained the existence of three worlds, the world of God, the world of the Will or the Word, and the world of created things."

"Briefly, such are the least of the mysteries of the composition of the Greatest Name upon the stone of the Divine ring.

"Observe also that the three planes represent the world of God ['alam-i-haqq], the world of Command ['alam-i-amr], and the world of Creation ['alam-i-khalq], which are the sources of the signs."

"The inscription upon the Bahá'í ringstone is the Symbol of the Greatest Name, Bahá', Who is the Manifestation of the essence of God. It is also symbolic of the

three planes, representing the World of God, the World of Revelation and the World of Creation."Lights of Guidance, #909, p. 269.

Dr. Momen has contrasted what he calls "Differences between Eastern and Western Religious Thought". The studies and experience of the present author have inclined him to regard this conventional depiction of the differences between certain groups of religious traditions as reflecting a series of generalizations which do not accurately represent the tremendous diversity of religious life in any of the religions represented here. Dr. Momen begins by stating that the Western tradition is dualist and the Eastern monist. However, there are currents in Judaism, Christianity and Islam which are monist in tendency, and schools of Hinduism and Buddhism which recognize distinctions between the Absolute Reality and Its perfect and imperfect emanations. Also, inasmuch as the Bahá'í canon has unequivocally condemned the doctrine of monism, and asserted that the original teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism were not monist, there does not seem to be much value in contrasting these two views, as if they were equally viable from a Bahá'í perspective. It is hard to understand the purpose of effecting this contrast, except if the reader were to accept the underlying premise--that the Bahá'í canon supports the monist view along with the so-called dualist view.

In Table 1 of Dr. Momen's article, the first item listed is a contrast between a dualist "Creator God" and a monist "Absolute." As students of esoteric Judaism, Christianity and Islam are well aware, the Essence of God is represented in all three of these traditions as unknowable, inaccessible, much closer to the "Absolute" than to any of the anthropomorphic representations of the "Creator God." In the Bahá'í canon, Deity is represented as wholly beyond human understanding, and indeed, beyond the understanding of the Manifestations of God Themselves. God creates not by Himself or of His own substance, but through the agency of His "First Creation"--hence, He is not to be defined by His creation, nor by any other of His acts or attributes. This teaching is the original teaching of all the Prophets of God according to Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá—and this would include Krishna and Buddha.

The second item listed in Table 1 contrasts the dualist "man as distinct from

God" with the monist "man as God" (or Buddhist "man as no-thing"). Bahá'u'lláh clearly and emphatically insists upon the distinction between man and God, and hence this does not seem to be subject to an alternative interpretation. There are schools of Hinduism and Buddhism which do not insist upon a lack of distinction between man and God--while historians as well as Hindus and Buddhists may not regard these schools and their scriptures as the most likely to have preserved the authentic teachings of Krishna and Buddha, it is nevertheless these schools whose teachings are most compatible with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

The third item in Table 1 contrasts two definitions of "evil": the dualist doctrine--"transgression against the law of God"--with the monist conviction--"due to man's ignorance and self-delusion." The Bahá'í canon does not support one of these views over the other. Rather, it insists that man transgresses the law of God due to his ignorance and self-delusion. While contrary to Dr. Momen's statement, the Hindu and Buddhist masses certainly believe in evil, as well as in "man's ignorance and self-delusion" (and the same could be said for most of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim populations), the authentic teaching of the Manifestations unites the two. 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides an explanation of evil which denies its objective or independent existence apart from human beings. What we call "evil" is really "illusion" - perhaps akin to the Hindu and Buddhist "maya" - and its "darkness" is the absence of the real, the truth, the light. Dr. Momen does not compare two doctrines with regard to human freedom of will, but other commentators on Eastern and Western religion have described the former as fatalistic and the latter as involving some human capacity for choice. Such a distinction would also be contrary to Baha'i teachings, inasmuch as they portray every human being as having freedom of will, and, simultaneously, subject to the influence of other existences, including the Will of God. Baha'u'llah described the commission of evil as willful disobedience to the Will of God.

The fourth item on Table 1 cited by Dr. Momen contrasts a dualist "path to salvation" which "depends upon faith, or upon good works and adherence to the Holy Law, or is simply a matter of the grace of God" with a monist "acquisition of knowledge or wisdom, i.e., the ability to see things as they really are." Once

again, esoteric Judaism, Christianity and Islam are in agreement with "salvation" through "acquisition of knowledge or wisdom" while exoteric Hinduism (particularly Vaisnavite and Shaivite sects) and Buddhism (certain Mahayana schools such as Pure Land and Tibetan) inculcate "faith," "good works," "adherence to the Holy Law," and/or submission to "the grace of God." Indeed, in virtually all religious traditions, the "path to salvation" is shared by all believers, while the "acquisition of knowledge or wisdom" is the privilege of those relatively few believers who pursue the mystical path, and complete dedication to religion, often to the exclusion of other aspects of human life. The Baha'i Faith insists that both are necessary and complementary. Baha'u'llah harmonizes these two views, and indicates that they are complementary rather than contradictory. It may be said that "salvation depends on faith" and also "on good works and adherence to the Holy Law," that it is always subject to "the grace of God," for He doeth whatsoever He willeth. On the other hand, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written that "By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds." Bahá'u'lláh has expressed this same order in "Kitab-i-Aqdas" (first, "recognition" and second, "observance"), and in the short obligatory prayer (first, "knowledge" and second, "worship"). Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá both stressed the importance of meditation, education and purity of heart, which have more to do with consciousness than with practice. The false dichotomy between these two approaches to religious life is swept aside by Baha'u'llah, and indeed it is in its reconciliation of traditional opposites that the Baha'i teachings challenge the followers of all faiths to recognize the fundamental unity of the spiritual path.

The next two (fifth and sixth) items on this Table present a dualist stance--that "the purpose of salvation is to escape from hell" and "the goal of salvation is heaven or paradise"--and a monist profession--"the purpose of salvation is to escape from the suffering of this world" and "the goal of salvation is to achieve the state of blissfulness, nirvana or moksa". To this author, these represent mis-statements of the positions of both of these religious traditions. Nonetheless, Bahá'u'lláh does not present positions resembling either of these stances. The purpose of salvation, according to Bahá'u'lláh, is to enable man to achieve his true potential, to rise to the noble state for which he was created, to achieve liberation from the disappointing and ephemeral world of mortality and discover the joyous and eternal world of the spiritual life. The stated goal of salvation is

nearness to God, and this is paradise, this is moksa (liberation), true happiness and true freedom. It has often been assumed that the goal of religious experience is "happiness" of some kind, but in fact, all religions teach that true "happiness" is the lot of that person who sacrifices himself. If his aim is to achieve "happiness" then he will not sacrifice his happiness, and yet it is only in doing so that he can discover true happiness.

The seventh item contrasts dualistic "ritual elements" which revolve around worship and sacraments" and monistic "ritual elements" which "revolve around meditation and achievement of altered states of consciousness." Exoteric Hinduism and Buddhism is as focused on "worship and sacraments" as exoteric Judaism, Christianity or Islam. And it is exoteric religion which is the religion of the masses. On the other hand, esoteric Judaism, Christianity and Islam has been much more interested in promoting "meditation and achievement of altered states of consciousness" than in "worship and sacraments" for their own sake--although all of these religions actually employ "worship and sacraments" as techniques in their quest for authentic spiritual life. The Bahá'í canon encourages "meditation" and discourages the elaboration of "sacraments"--it elevates work into the status of "worship" and urges every individual to purify his heart so that his consciousness may be altered, transformed indeed, through the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the eighth item states that the dualist view of time is "progressive historical time with a beginning and an end centered on a particular apocalyptic event"; while the monist view is of "cyclical time in a world with no beginning or end." It should be noted that the esoteric Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions incorporate elements of both views, with many mystics favoring the cyclical over the historical perspective. In Hindu and Buddhist literature are to be found many historical accounts, that is stories about spiritual champions that take place in real time and involve real interactions with ordinary human beings. While the doctrine of reincarnation and its various permutations is found more prominently in Hinduism and Buddhism than in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is emphatically denied by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the concept of "return" is entirely revised in their Writings, resulting in a complete transformation from material recapitulations of the same existence to spiritual reappearances of

the same attributes. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá further acknowledge that the perception of time depends upon the station and individuality of the observer. They both affirm the existence of universal historical cycles, including prophetic ages and cycles. They also indicate the importance of progressive historical time, inasmuch as this relates to the advancement of civilization, one of the main purposes of human existence, and of the religion of God.

In summation, the Bahá'í teachings do not confirm many of the differences between the "Western-Dualist" and the "Eastern/Monist" religious traditions posited by Dr. Momen. In some cases the Bahá'í teachings declare certain aspects of these traditions to be invalid, and in other cases they redefine traditional views so that they will conform to reality. For it is not doctrine that concerns Bahá'u'lláh, but reality. It is not systematic theology or metaphysics, but truth. Bahá'u'lláh does not try to reconcile differing points of view by suggesting compromise solutions, or by re-phrasing contrasting teachings so that they may be understood in new ways. As an independent and Universal Manifestation, He simply reveals the truth to us as it was revealed to Him.

The cosmology employed by Bahá'u'lláh, according to Dr. Momen, "is his adaptation of the one used by many philosophers and mystics in the Islamic world." Many Western scholars, particularly those who specialize in Islamic studies, are of the view that Bahá'u'lláh adopted and adapted the neo-Platonic and neo-Pythagorean metaphysics of the "Ishraqi" school in Persia, as transmitted from Ibn Sina and Yayha Suhrawardi to Mulla Sadra and eventually to Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i and Siyyid Kazim Rashti. In contrast to this assertion, Bahá'u'lláh indicates that He speaks only the Word revealed to Him by God, and that He knows only what is revealed to Him--that His learning is innate and inspired rather than acquired through reading and study. In *Lawh-i-Hikmat* (Tablet of Wisdom) Bahá'u'lláh describes a different sequence of transmission of the "divine philosophy", some aspects of which may have been transmitted to the "Ishraqi" school:

"The sages aforetime acquired their knowledge from the Prophets, inasmuch as the latter were the Exponents of divine philosophy [hikmat ilahi]..."

"The essence and the fundamentals of philosophy have emanated from the Prophets."

In Lawh Basit al-Haqiqat (Tablet on the Simple Reality), Bahá'u'lláh states:

"The first person who devoted himself to philosophy was Idris. Thus was he named. Some called him also Hermes. In every tongue he hath a special name."

Idris/Hermes is referred to in Lawh-i-Hikmat as "the Father of Philosophy." Idris is mentioned in the Qur'an as "a truthful man [siddiiqaan] and a Prophet [nabiyyaan]" of God, and as "among the steadfast [sabiriin]." The name Idris is derived from the Arabic root "d-r-s" which is related to learning, teaching and to educational institutions and professions. Muslim historians regard Idris as the same person as the Biblical Enoch, who is said to have "walked with God" and to have disappeared "for God took him." Enoch has the meaning "initiated" in Hebrew, and is therefore also related to learning. Enoch was traditionally regarded as the author of several non-canonical apocalyptic works, both of Jewish and Christian provenance. He is also mentioned in the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews, saying that "By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God." In the general epistle of Jude, also found in the New Testament, we find this reference: "And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him." This passage is paraphrased from one of the non-canonical apocalyptic books associated with Enoch. It is evident that the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions alike regarded Enoch/Idris as a holy one and prophet of God. Bahá'u'lláh has identified this Prophet of God as the Father of Philosophy, both material and divine.

In Lawh-i-Hikmat, and Lawh Basit al-Haqiqat Bahá'ullah affirms that Balinus (Apollonius of Tyana) derived his wisdom from the Hermetic Tablets. In Lawh-i-Hikmat He also states that the Greek philosopher Empedocles "was a

contemporary of David" and that his fellow countryman Pythagoras "lived in the days of Solomon, son of David, and acquired Wisdom from the treasury of prophethood." He does not indicate how Pythagoras acquired this Wisdom. In *Some Answered Questions, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicated that Socrates, Plato, Hippocrates and other Greek philosophers studied "divine philosophy" [hikmat ilahī] with the Prophets and wise men of Israel. This same teaching is found in some of His public addresses in North America during the year 1912, English translations of which are published in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. In one of His talks 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that "divine philosophy" was cultivated by the Oriental (Persian and Greek) philosophers. In these and other addresses, 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to this subject as "divine philosophy," the "science of Divinity," "spiritual science," "divine science" and "divine sciences," "oriental philosophy," and "deistic philosophy."

While neither Bahá'u'lláh nor 'Abdu'l-Bahá seem to have mentioned Plotinus, Porphyry, Ibn Sina, Yahya Suhrawardi or even Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i as among the Oriental philosophers who passed along "divine philosophy," the chain of transmission of this "divine science" can be reconstructed through reference to various Jewish, Christian and Islamic sources. Often "divine philosophy" has been called neo-Platonist, but Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have made it abundantly clear that the origin and author of the true "divine philosophy" is not Plato, nor any of his so-called followers and interpreters, but rather the Prophets of God, and ultimately, God Himself. That this lineage has resulted in some individual deviations from the original wisdom is not surprising, inasmuch as it has been conveyed, through fragmentary writings and esoteric instruction over a period of at least 2500 years.

Dr. Momen cites *Lawh-i-Kullu't-Ta'am* (Tablet of all Food) as a source of Bahá'u'lláh's cosmological teachings. In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh reveals the true significances of the five cosmological realms described by certain Muslim authors. Four of these realms ("lahut," "jabarut," "malakut," "nasut") are listed in "Haft Vadi", along with the four worlds of time ("zaman," "dahr," "sarmad," "azal") and the four "journeys in the pathway of love"; regarding all of these realms, Bahá'u'lláh affirms, in "Haft Vadi":

"These statements are made in the sphere of that which is relative, because of the limitations of men. Otherwise, those personages who in a single step have passed over the world of the relative and the limited, and dwelt on the fair plane of the Absolute, and pitched their tent in the worlds of authority and command--have burned away these relativities with a single spark, and blotted out these worlds with a drop of dew..."

"Thus it hath been made clear that these stages depend on the vision of the wayfarer. In every city he will behold a world, in every Valley reach a spring, in every meadow hear a song."

It would then seem that Bahá'u'lláh is warning His reader not to treat these "realms" as other than human understandings, which are necessarily relative and which "depend upon the vision of the wayfarer." On the other hand, the five worlds described in *Lawh-i-Kullu't-Ta'am* (which include the four worlds--"lahut," "jabarut," "malakut," "nasut"--found in "Haft Vadi"--and add the world of "hahut") are related by Bahá'u'lláh to the three conditions of existence. As this Tablet has not yet been published in an English translation, we will base our analysis of its contents on Dr. Momen's paper and also on Dr. Bijan Mas'umian's article on this Tablet published in *Deepen magazine*. Bahá'u'lláh relates the world of "hahut" to the Unknowable Essence of God, and hence to the condition of Deity, the world of God; the worlds of "lahut" and "jabarut" to the Primal Will and to the Prophets as agents of that Will, both of which are aspects of the condition of Prophethood, the world of Command; and the worlds of "malakut" and "nasut" are made to refer to the condition of servitude, the world of Creation, with the first the realm of angels and souls subsequent to their earthly sojourn, and the second the realm of physical existence.

Dr. Momen represents "this particular schema of five realms" as simply one of several alternative cosmologies, including one which "breaks up the realms of God into two: God and His Creation; another into three: God, the Manifestation of God and Man; and others that break up the five realms above described into smaller units: dividing the realm of nasut into the mineral, vegetable, and animal worlds". It is his intention in citing these various ontological schemes to

suggest, indeed to insist, that Baha'u'llah did not inculcate definite views of reality, and was tolerant and perhaps even an advocate of metaphysical pluralism. He quotes a verse from one of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets found in Gleanings where Baha'u'llah affirms that "the worlds of God are countless in their number, and infinite in their range. None can reckon or comprehend them except God, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise." Dr. Momen apparently regards this statement as affirming a relativist stance with regard to metaphysics. He also describes a verse from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which he understands to teach that all plurality disappears when one enters the "ocean of oneness". Of course, Baha'u'llah did depict a psychological state of consciousness in which the mystic enters the "valley of unity" and "looketh on all things with the eye of oneness", but immediately thereafter He wrote: "It is clear to thine Eminence that all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision." Evidently, the human perception of the unity of all things is a stage of the human journey which proceeds "from his own vision". In the seventh, final valley of the spiritual journey, the valley of true poverty and absolute nothingness, "the wayfarer leaveth behind him the stages of the "oneness of Being and Manifestation" [1] and reacheth a oneness that is sanctified above these two stations." These are the two Sufi doctrines of wahdat-i-wujud and wahdat-i-shuhud, neither of which actually describes reality as it is.

In order to convince his reader that Bahá'u'lláh made statements "which are very clearly monist", Dr. Momen cited a verse from Kalimat-i-Maknunih (Hidden Words) and three passages from Haft Vadi (Seven Valleys), two works of Bahá'u'lláh which were written in response to the spiritual needs of two or more Muslim mystics (Sufis). Inasmuch as these outwardly different depictions of cosmological reality are not discussed in context, that is, as Dr. Momen does not help us to understand any of the cosmological statements of Bahá'u'lláh in the specific context in which they were originally set forth; their referents in Islamic theology, mysticism and philosophy; their relation to the other Writings of Baha'u'llah; their relation to the Scriptures of previous Manifestations; their authoritative interpretation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi; and as these cosmological constructs are not compared and contrasted with one another--it is difficult for the reader of this article to discern whether Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are revealing different aspects of one truth to various different persons,

using a variety of terminology in order to communicate effectively with those individuals, or, as Dr. Momen intends for us to conclude, if they are advocating or indeed mandating a wholly relativist position with regard to the human perception of reality.

On the other hand, we find many references in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the oneness of reality, to the attainment to "seeing with the eye of God" and these statements seem to advocate a unitary vision of existence, one in which God is one, Manifestation is one, Creation is one, the three are altogether one reality, and every other concept of reality arises out of the consciousness of man rather than from the necessity of existence. Dr. Momen advocates a relativist view of reality, basing it on the relativity of human perception. He states that this view harmonizes the various religious traditions as currently encountered in history and in the world today. Were this point of view consonant with the Bahá'í teachings, the reader would be obliged to agree with Dr. Momen. Indeed, relativism, like multiculturalism, has many practical advantages. However, the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh seems to be that there is one reality; that human perception of this one reality is not dependable or authoritative; that the Prophets of God reveal the true nature of the one reality; that the Prophets summon each human being to abandon his personal partial understanding based upon his relative station and experience, and to embrace the holistic, unitary vision of reality which is revealed by God in the Book and in nature. Hence, as it is said, religion and science agree, the book of revelation and the book of nature are both books of God, for both "worlds" --the spiritual and the physical-- are actually one world, one reality, one truth. This is not a monist vision. It is a holistic, a systems approach, which perceives the totality of existence as an organic ecosystem rather than a single substance with many appearances.

Having introduced his reader to the issues at hand, Dr. Momen presents his main proposal--"Relativism as a Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics". His argument is carefully constructed, and documented with many citations from the Bahá'í canon. As such, and given the much deserved reputation of the author for his scholarly acumen, as well as the broad popularity of relativist metaphysics and epistemology in our time, his proposal has been found acceptable to many learned students of the Bahá'í Revelation. He cites a number of passages from

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh (translated by Shoghi Effendi in Gleanings and by himself) which refer to the inability of the human being to understand the nature of God and to transcend the limitations which have been imposed upon humanity by God Himself. In certain of His talks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that it is precisely because of this inability, these human limitations, that all human criteria of knowledge (epistemology) are faulty, and that the only infallible methods for knowing the truth are either through the agreement of the four criteria of human knowledge (senses, reason, tradition and intuition) or through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit--which is revealed in the Prophets of God, and in their chosen believers, those who are reborn in the spirit of faith. Hence, although the human being is inherently limited, nevertheless, by bringing together and harmonizing the various means available to him, and through inspiration from the Holy Spirit, he may yet come to that unitary vision of reality which is the closest he can come to knowing things as they really are.

Bahá'u'lláh often writes that those who see things from one perspective are right, while those who see from another are also right--He has articulated this teaching with regard to the nature of God, of the Manifestation of God, of the Creation of the universe, of the inner reality or soul of man. However, it would be mistaken to assume that Bahá'u'lláh encourages relativist vision. He always points His reader to a higher perception of reality, and ultimately to that unitary vision in which the human point of view is subsumed into the divine perspective. Indeed, as Dr. Momen states, Bahá'ullah and 'Abdu'l-Bahá often assert that the very best that the human being can do is to better understand himself, that is, his true self. This understanding, nonetheless, is also related to the unitary vision of reality, inasmuch as the knowledge of the true self of man is synonymous with the knowledge of the Manifestation of God and the knowledge of God Himself: the true self of man is like a mirror which reflects all of the names and attributes of God (and all we can know of anything, including ourselves, are our names and attributes, inasmuch as the essence of everything including ourselves is imperceptible to us and how much moreso the essence of the Manifestation and the essence of God); and the true self of man reflects those names and attributes of God through the mediation of the Manifestation of God who is like a Perfect Mirror of those same names and attributes. All are united in their reflection of the divine names and attributes, and each is separate and distinct according to its station and condition of existence.

Dr. Momen cites Shoghi Effendi's statement, published in *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*:

"The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh...is that religious truth is not absolute but relative" and that the teachings of the different religions are "facets of one truth." What then is the meaning of this statement? Dr. Momen takes these words to mean that "we are unable to make any absolute statements about Reality or the structure of being (i.e., ontology) because any knowledge or understanding that we have of these is relative."

The original of this statement by the Guardian is dated 1947 and was addressed to the United Nations:

"The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, the followers of His Faith firmly believe, is that *Religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process*, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the non-essential aspects of their doctrines and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society."

Another similar statement is found in the Guardian's letter dated March 21, 1932:

"The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest 58 degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its

claims. Its teachings revolve around *the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final.* Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.”

The unitary vision revealed by the Prophets of God leads the author to take exception to Dr. Momen’s interpretation of this teaching, inasmuch as he omitted the context in which the passage he cited was to be found, which was identical in both statements. The relativity of religious truth is not brought about or made necessary because of the limitations of human perception, but because “Divine Revelation is progressive, not final.” Hence, the present author affirms, in contradiction to the relativist interpretation, that the Prophet makes definitive statements about Reality and the structure of being, and that the statements of the most recent Manifestation of God are entirely reliable; while these statements are adapted to our human station and therefore necessarily limited, and while they are naturally understood by each human being each according to his capacity and therefore also necessarily limited, yet they are definite and unchallengeable statements, as indicated by Bahá’u’lláh in *Kitab-i-Aqdas*:

"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."

As for those who would question whether this statement is meant to be interpreted literally or figuratively, Bahá’u’lláh continues:

"We have not entered any school, nor read any of your dissertations. Incline your ears to the words of this unlettered One, wherewith He summoneth you unto God, the Ever-Abiding. Better is this for you than all the treasures of the earth, could ye but comprehend it.

"Whoso interpreteth what hath been sent down from the heaven of Revelation, and altereth its evident meaning, he, verily, is of them that have perverted the

Sublime Word of God, and is of the lost ones in the Lucid Book."

Qualifying this bold and lucid statement, is Baha'u'llah's affirmation in Kitab-i-Iqan:

"It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be as a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby the wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion."

The verses just cited from Kitab-i-Aqdas would seem to be composed in the "outward language...devoid of allusions" and hence meant to be understood without requiring interpretation, that is, literally and as is. Bahá'u'lláh writes of that "other language" which is "veiled and concealed" in Kitab-i-Iqan:

"The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed..."

"The people, therefore, must not allow such utterances to deprive them of the divine bounties, but should rather seek enlightenment from them who are the recognized Expounders thereof, so that the hidden mysteries may be unravelled, and be made manifest."

Who are "recognized Expounders" of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh? According to the Kitab-i-'Ahd of Baha'u'llah 'Abdu'l-Baha is the appointed expounder of His teachings, and as affirmed in the Will & Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the appointed interpreter after Him was to be Shoghi Effendi. Both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi have indicated that the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh are indeed "the unerring Balance established amongst men"--not just in one Tablet or letter but in hundreds and perhaps thousands of references.

To return to Dr. Momen's paper, the present author submits that Baha'u'llah and His "recognized Expounders" affirmed as definitive the statements of the most recent Manifestation of God with regard to Reality and to ontology. Hence,

there is a hierarchy of human experience, and it is fashioned according to human capacity, wherein the teaching of the Manifestation is at the highest level. It is not absolute, for nothing in the created world is absolute...but it is superlative. The Manifestation and His teachings are conditionally superlative, inasmuch as they are designated as the superlative for humanity for the duration of an age or cycle, and they represent the only superlative in human experience which is otherwise inherently relative. Viewed in the context of the many statements of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá with regard to cosmology, and specifically to the references to the three conditions of existence, Shoghi Effendi's affirmation of the Bahá'í principle--"religious truth is not absolute but relative"--seems to have these significances:

- 1) Religious truth is relative because only God is Absolute and therefore truth cannot be absolute but must be contingent and dependent and therefore relative.
- 2) Religious truth is relative because the Prophets Who reveal religious truth are contingent and dependent and therefore relative realities.
- 3) Religious truth is relative because it is revealed in the language of men, which is relative.
- 4) Religious truth is relative because human existence and perception are relative, and in order to be understood by human beings, it must be relative.
- 5) Religious truth is relative because humanity is in an ongoing process of evolution, and hence it must be adapted to changing human needs and circumstances.
- 6) Religious truth is relative because it is revealed progressively over the course of ages and cycles rather than in one supreme moment which is located outside of history and which has no antecedents in the past and no successors in the future.

The reader immediately understands that none of these significances of the relativity of religious truth call into question the definite and definitive nature of the message of the most recent Manifestation of God. On the contrary, the relativity of religious truth necessitates that Prophets of God appear at relatively regular intervals throughout history in order to guide humanity to ever more evolved stages in its evolution. The relativity of religious truth explains the need

for the new Prophet of God, for the new secondary laws of religion, for the fresh revelation of the Spirit.

Likewise, Shoghi Effendi's statement that the different religions of the world reveal "facets of one truth" can likewise be understood in these ways:

- 1) Each Dispensation has emphasized certain teachings, certain divine attributes over others.
- 2) Each Dispensation has fostered the development of a particular facet of humankind's corporate life: family, tribe, nation, humankind.
- 3) Each Dispensation has appeared to some to be singular and apart from all others--like the gleaming of single facets of a jewel--while they are in reality but surfaces of the same gem.

Once again, we are reminded of the words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá which encourage human beings to go beyond the plurality of vision into which they are born and educated, and to seek out the unitary vision which corresponds to the revelation of Reality. For, as the Central Figures have untiringly emphasized, the essential reality of God is one, the Messengers of God are essentially one, and the religions of God and their essential teachings are one. We can be caught up with the different facets of a jewel, or we can appreciate the jewel as a whole--there is a part of us which seeks to separate and another which seeks to unite. Do we know according to "satanic" or "divine" knowledge? Do we favor the "satanic" or the "divine" aspect of ourselves? Do we see with the "eyes of men" or with the "eye of God"?

After citing the efficacy of the relativist position as a means of harmonizing the monist and dualist views currently held by various communities of religionists world-wide, Dr. Momen states: "It would appear that every religion that is going to be truly universal must evolve both of these types of religious expression in order to satisfy the religious aspirations of all types of people." This assumes that there are fundamentally two types of people, and that those who are of one type live in the Orient and are Hindus and Buddhists while those of the other type live in the Occident and are Jews, Christians and Muslims. There is simply no evidence to support such a view, nor, for that matter that the infinite variety of

humanity that is manifest to all of us to an ever-increasing degree because of the development and widespread dissemination of communications technologies, can be boiled down into two types. Dr. Momen made the same mistake in his paper entitled "*Fundamentalism and Liberalism*" in which he posited two types of human psychology, reflected in two types of religious adherent - the fundamentalist and the liberal.

This dualistic view has its appeal in this age of secular dominance and democratic aspirations. However, it does not appear to be expounded in the Writings of the Central Figures or the letters of Shoghi Effendi, which, on the contrary, evince an uncompromising adherence to definite principles which have established the Bahá'í Faith as a separate religion (from both Islam and Bábism) and to a definitive claim to truth which contradicts some of the most cherished religious convictions of all of the traditions Dr. Momen has cited. In other words, it does not seem to be the purpose of the Prophet of God and His chosen ones to "satisfy the religious aspirations of all types of people" but rather it is His purpose to guide humanity--in all of its great variety--to the straight and narrow pathway of God.

Furthermore, the Guardian addressed this question of two opposed views in a letter written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma, dated September 5, 1936:

"There are two main principles which the Guardian wishes the friends to always bear in mind and to conscientiously and faithfully follow. First is the principle of unqualified and whole-hearted loyalty to the revealed Word. *The believers should be careful not to deviate, even a hairbreadth, from the Teachings. Their supreme consideration should be to safeguard the purity of the principles, tenets and laws of the Faith. It is only by this means that they can hope to maintain the organic unity of the Cause. There can and should be no liberals and conservatives, no moderates or extremists in the Cause. For they are all subject to the one and the same law which is the law of God. This law transcends all differences, all personal or local tendencies, moods and aspirations.*

"Next is the principle of complete, and immediate obedience to the Assemblies, both local and national. It is the responsibility of these Bahá'í administrative bodies to enable the community to acquire, and increasingly deepen, in the knowledge and understanding of the Cause."

While the peoples of the world may be busy dividing and conquering, separating people from one another in order better to control them, the Baha'i Faith stands for the unity of humankind, for non-partisanship, for non-violence, for an elimination of divisions. Relativism accepts divisions as inevitable and immutable. The principle of progressive revelation is incompatible with both propositions.

The means which have been employed by the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith to attract a wide variety of individuals and communities may have varied considerably, as is amply demonstrated in the Tablets and utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá; however, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith represent one indivisible whole, and the Bahá'í Covenant does not permit their unguided and unrestricted interpretation by individuals according to their specific "religious aspirations." This does not of course imply that there is no room for personality and individual aspiration in the Cause of God--for the individual must find his own way to God, his own way of understanding the Word of God, his own way to follow the laws and live in accordance with the teachings of the Religion of God. However, humankind cannot come to unitary vision, to what some call "cosmic consciousness" and what others call "world-embracing vision," without coming and staying in touch with reality and sacrificing particular linguistic and ideological preferences to take on the universal language of the heart. If the Messengers of God had been sent to "satisfy the religious aspirations of all types of people" surely they would not have insisted on the oneness of God, and condemned all forms of polytheism! For while there are certainly millions of dualists and perhaps also millions of monists, the greater part of humanity--whether Hindus or Buddhists or Taoists or animists or materialists--are functional polytheists and idolaters. Bahá'u'lláh is uncompromising in His monotheism, and, furthermore, He is firm in His insistence that all human conceptions of God are fallacious. He also affirms that those who reject His prophetic mission have rejected all the Prophets of the past, and further still, have rejected God Himself. This manifestly eliminates most religionists from qualifying as "true believers" and certainly falls far short of any attempt "to satisfy the religious aspirations of all types of people."

Dr. Momen again quotes 'Abdu'l-Bahá, saying: "'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to be

referring to this phenomenon [the evolution of monist and dualist types of religious expression by all truly universal religions] and also laying the basis of the Bahá'í reconciliation of fundamental differences of religious doctrine and outlook when he states: 'The differences among the religions of the world are due to the varying types of minds.'

When we go to read the Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá from which this passage has been excerpted, we find that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is advocating not relativism, but unitary vision:

"O thou dear friend! Know thou that the distinguished Individual of every age is endowed according to the perfections of His age. That Individual who in past ages was set above His fellows was gifted according to the virtues of His time. But in this age of splendours, this era of God, the pre-eminent Personage, the luminous Orb, the chosen Individual will shine out with such perfections and such power as ultimately to dazzle the minds of every community and group. And since such a Personage is superior to all others in spiritual perfections and heavenly attainments, and is indeed the focal centre of divine blessings and the pivot of the circle of light. He will encompass the others, and there is no doubt whatsoever that He will shine out with such power as to gather every soul into His sheltering shade.

"When ye consider this matter with care, it will become apparent that this is according to a universal law, which one can find at work in all things: the whole attracteth the part, and in the circle, the centre is the pivot of the compasses. Ponder thou upon the Spirit [Jesus]: because He was the focal centre of spiritual power, the wellspring of divine bounties, although at the beginning He gathered unto Himself only a very few souls, later on He was able, because of that all-subduing power that He had, to unite within the sheltering Tabernacle of Christendom all the differing sects. Compare the present with the past, and see how great is the difference; thus canst thou arrive at truth and certitude.

"The differences among the religions of the world are due to the varying types of minds. So long as the powers of the mind are various, it is certain that men's judgements and opinions will differ one from another. *If, however, one single, universal perceptive power be introduced--a power encompassing all the rest--those differing opinions will merge, and a spiritual harmony and oneness will become apparent.* For example, when the Christ was made manifest, the minds of the

various contemporary peoples, their views, their emotional attitudes, whether they were Romans, Greeks, Syrians, Israelites, or others, were at variance with one another. But once His universal power was brought to bear, it gradually succeeded, after the lapse of three hundred years, in gathering together all those divergent minds under the protection, and within the governance, of one central Point, all sharing the same spiritual emotions in their hearts."

In conclusion, the author has found Dr. Momen's case for Relativism as a basis for Bahá'í metaphysics less than convincing, and proposes in its stead the model introduced at the beginning of this essay--the three conditions of existence. While the author's argument against Relativism as a basis for understanding the Bahá'í Revelation and the nature of Reality has been hitherto drafted in the form of a response to Dr. Momen's article, at this point he will digress from this inasmuch as he has answered that argument as fully as he is capable. Relativism is an extremely popular trend in Western society, and probably, because of the vast influence of that society throughout the world, upon all peoples. While Dr. Momen's statement that "Relativism has in one form or another thoroughly permeated the thinking of the modern world" may be slightly exaggerated, it is certainly the case that this world-view has had a very broad impact on Western society, and is fast gaining in influence throughout the world.

Cultural relativism, known also as multiculturalism, pluralism, post-modernism, deconstructionism, and associated in the United States with "social justice", with "political correctness", and most recently with "woke" has indeed made inroads into a number of institutions, including those associated with higher learning (and increasingly all levels of education), entertainment (movies, television, popular singers), journalism (print and broadcast), IT (and related fields), and now also into commerce, politics and governance has made it very much out of fashion to assert that any one culture or people or religion or profession or idea may be superior, and that another may be inferior. The relativist dogma stipulates that all cultures have something equally valuable to offer, that no one is better than any other. Intellectual relativism, as it pertains to all sorts of intellectual standards, including logical argument, appropriate use of language--vocabulary and grammar--and particularly with reference to the deconstruction of intellectual hierarchies is also the rage. Only the physical sciences seem to

be relatively safe from this epidemic of "anything goes." Moral and ethical relativism is so well documented that it scarcely deserves mention here; and yet it is the cornerstone of the decline in civility, in courtesy, in family, community, and participation in the body politic at all levels. Religious relativism threatens to blur the important distinctions between the Prophets of God and their specific Revelations; it also threatens to replace religion as we know it with "acceptable" norms which are "flexible" and "accommodating to different points of view"--and, ironically, to encourage the retrenchment, authoritarianism and literalism of many religious conservatives (who see no viable alternative but to go back to the clear standards they are familiar with, for there is no real alternative to real food).

North American and Western European society has long sought to reach a level which can be shared by all citizens, rather than to aspire to higher standards and effect the uplifting of its citizenry. North Americans in particular generally seem to have eschewed higher standards as too inflexible and impractical for the rough and ready of life in a "new world" and consequently many Americans exhibit a profound ambivalence to anything higher than that with which they are already familiar and comfortable. This is making itself felt all over the planet. It seems easier to a lot of people, regardless of culture, to adopt a relativist stance than to grapple with replacing fixed standards which have outlived their usefulness with new standards which can facilitate the establishment of a global civilization in which each will find his place, immeasurably more exalted than he ever could have imagined. Given the world-wide trendiness of Relativism, it is particularly important that students of the Bahá'í Revelation carefully detach themselves from popular notions in their investigation of the truth. The principal stumbling block of past generations may have been imitation [taqlid] of ancestral beliefs and traditional dogmas, while the more subtle obstacle of our own time may be a similar tendency to imitate popular intellectual and cultural icons. Unmitigated literalism and traditionalism on the one hand, and unrelenting relativism and progressivism on the other represent twin challenges to the seeker of truth. The Baha'i Faith champions the "harmony which must exist between science and religion", and even claims to be "scientific in its method". We know that scientists must make every effort to remain objective and set aside their subjectivity, their feelings and desires. Likewise, Bahá'u'lláh has advised the true seeker to detach himself from all things save God, if he wishes

to know the truth:

"He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth. Even as thou dost witness in this day how most of the people, because of such love and hate, are bereft of the immortal Face, have strayed far from the Embodiments of the divine mysteries, and shepherdless, are roaming through the wilderness of oblivion and error. That seeker must at all times put his trust in God, must renounce the peoples of the earth, detach himself from the world of dust, and cleave unto Him Who is the Lord of Lords."

Only a consecration to objective reality, to discernible truth can fortify the soul that would face the phantasm of relativism and the dinosaur of traditionalism, cross swords in the field of intellectual battle, and win the day, every day. Hiding behind indefensible ideologies or claiming superhuman judgment will arm the warrior with the implements he most needs. Science, reason, truth, inspiration are humble, and true religion must be humble as well. The most humble religion will prevail.