



Progressive Revelation: A Brief Circumstantial/Historical Contextualization

**Second Part of a Series
For the Fort Erie Fireside**

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May 16, 2022

Introductory Note I

- Apologies for the fact that slide design will be quite basic, as compared to what was seen in Part I
- This second presentation will unavoidably be much more textual, and also faster-paced, given the available time and the amount of material
- Please mute yourselves
- Please use the 'Chat' feature in Zoom to post your questions during the talk; we will get to these at the end.
- We will leave time for discussion after the questions

Introductory Notes II

In the first half of our presentation, we looked at some of the principles or characteristics of the doctrine of Progressive Revelation, as well as its spiritual significance, as given in the Writings of the Bab, Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha', and Shoghi Effendi.

We particularly emphasized the notion that, under this doctrine, all the Messengers proceed from the same divine Source, and teach essentially the same Message to mankind, only at different times and regions.

Introductory Notes III

The aim of this second half will be to look at some of the actual evidence of Progressive Revelation as it exists in the laws and teachings of previous Dispensations, to partially contextualize this evidence with the historical circumstances which existed throughout these past Dispensations, and also contextualize this evidence with respect to man's religious history as a whole.

We will be mainly confining our examples to the more recent Dispensations for which authentic, or partially authentic, scriptures and records exist, namely Zoroastrianism, Judaism (both Abrahamism and Mosaism), Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith.

“Progressive Revelation” in Baha’u’llah’s Writings

“Contemplate with thine inward eye the chain of successive Revelations that hath linked the Manifestation of Adam with that of The Báb. I testify before God that each one of these Manifestations hath been sent down through the operation of the Divine Will and Purpose, that each hath been the bearer of a specific Message, that each hath been entrusted with a divinely-revealed Book and been commissioned to unravel the mysteries of a mighty Tablet. The measure of the Revelation with which every one of them hath been identified had been definitely fore-ordained. This, verily, is a token of Our favor unto them, if ye be of those that comprehend this truth.... And when *this process of progressive Revelation culminated* in the stage at which His peerless, His most sacred, and exalted Countenance was to be unveiled to men's eyes, He chose to hide His own Self behind a thousand veils, lest profane and mortal eyes discover His glory.”
(*Gleanings*, XXXI:74-5)

Progressive Revelation in 'Abdu'l-Baha'

“Among the bounties of God is revelation. Hence revelation is progressive and continuous. It never ceases. It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world. The reality of Divinity is like an endless ocean. Revelation may be likened to the rain. Can you imagine the cessation of rain? Ever on the face of the earth somewhere rain is pouring down.” (‘Abdu'l-Baha', *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 378)

Progressive Revelation in Shoghi Effendi

“It should also be borne in mind that, great as is the power manifested by this Revelation and however vast the range of the Dispensation its Author has inaugurated, it emphatically repudiates the claim to be regarded as the final revelation of God's will and purpose for mankind. To hold such a conception of its character and functions would be tantamount to a betrayal of its cause and a denial of its truth. It must necessarily conflict with *the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous, and progressive, and not spasmodic or final.*” (Shoghi Effendi, *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*)

Suggested Meaning

When we hear or use the phrase *Progressive* Revelation in the context of the successive Dispensations, it tends to suggest that some or all of the characteristics, laws and teachings of a given Dispensation, or a given Manifestation, will *always* represent ethical, philosophical, mystical, social, scientific, legal, governmental, organizational, doctrinal, eschatological and/or theological advances over the characteristics, laws and teachings of the previous Dispensation. That is, we tend to think that each Dispensation, in terms of its teachings, eschatology, language, order and laws, will have a *direct* and *discernible* relationship with its immediate temporal predecessor.

Example

Zoroastrianism

(c. 1000 B.C., Northern Iran)

“Good Thoughts”

“Good Words”

“Good Deeds”

Buddhism

(c. 500 B.C., India)

- 1) Right Resolve/Intention
- 2) Right Speech
- 3) Right Action/Conduct
- 4) Right Livelihood
- 5) Right Effort
- 6) Right Mindfulness
- 7) Right Concentration
- 8) Right Practice

Further Suggestion

It is also implied by Scriptural Texts that Progressive revelation is *regular* or temporally equidistant:

“*For a thousand years* in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.” (Psalms 90:4).

“But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and *a thousand years* as one day.” (II Peter 3:8).

“Verily a day in the sight of thy Lord is like *a thousand years* of your reckoning.” (Qur’an 22:47)

“Once in about *a thousand years* shall this City [the Word of God] be renewed and readorned....” (Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings* CXXV:269)

First Challenge to the Theory

This perspective on progressive revelation is immediately challenged, however, if we look at Christianity, and its *immediate predecessor*, namely *Buddhism*, which appeared in India about 500 B.C.E.

In Baha'i teaching, both Buddhism and Christianity are recognized as divinely revealed religions, and both Buddha and Christ are considered to be Manifestations of God. Nonetheless, while the *ethics* of the two religions are quite similar, the language, the focus, the philosophy, the theology and the metaphysical ontology of the two religions are very different.

Second Challenge

Concerning the idea that progressive revelation is evenly spaced in time, with 1000 years always separating one Dispensation and the one to follow it, we only need to look at our early history, or the Heroic Age, to dispel such a view.

We sometimes tend to forget that, in one sense, the Bab and Baha'u'llah were Each the founders of a *separate and distinct Dispensation*, but contrary to common thinking, only 19 years was given to the first, while at least 1000 was allotted to the second.

Second Challenge: A Wider Perspective








PROGRESSIVE

THE LIGHT IS ONE

REVELATION

RELIGION IS ONE



KRISHNA	ABRAHAM	MOSES	ZOROASTER	GAUTAMA BUDDHA	JESUS CHRIST	MUHAMMAD	THE BĀB	BAHĀ'U'LLĀH
SANATANA DHARMA	JEWISH	JEWISH	ZOROASTRIAN	BUDDHIST	CHRISTIAN	ISLĀMIC	BĀBĪ	BAHĀ'Ī
C. 3200 B.C.	C. 2900 - 2334 B.C.	1750 B.C.	1000 B.C.	560 B.C.	1 A.D.	622	1844	1863
BHAGAVAD- GITA	SCROLLS OF ABRAHAM	EXODUS - DEUTERONOMY	AVESTA	PITAKAS	GOSPEL (NEW TESTAMENT)	QUR'ĀN	BAYĀN	KITĀB-I- AQDAS
								
INDIA	MESOPOTAMIA PALESTINE	EGYPT	IRĀN	INDIA	PALESTINE	ARABIA	IRĀN	IRĀN

Third Challenge

- The traditional charts which Baha'is use to portray progressive revelation (such as the one on the preceding slide) *only usually refer to the Manifestations Who we actually know about*, both from scriptures and from history, but there have been many, many others, as these passages indicate:
 - “And messengers We have mentioned to you before, *and messengers We have not mentioned to you*, - and to Musa (Moses) Allah spoke directly.” (Q. 4:163-164).
 - “And there never was a nation but a warner had passed among them” (Q. 35:24)
 - “*Unto the cities of all nations He hath sent His Messengers*, Whom He hath commissioned to announce unto men tidings of the Paradise of His good pleasure, and to draw them nigh unto the Haven of abiding security, the Seat of eternal holiness and transcendent glory.” (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, LXXVI:145)
- The Qur'an refers to the prophets *Hud* and *Salih*; some Islamic *hadith* (traditions) — all of them considered very weak (*Da'if*) or unreliable by Islamic scholars — give the number of messengers (*Nabi*) sent to mankind as 124 000 or 8000 and the number of *Apostles* (*Rasul*) as 313 or 315.
- If the number of Messengers and/or prophets is as great as these passages suggest, then the temporal duration between Them likely fluctuates even more than previously thought.

Key Questions

- 1) Is this suggested meaning of this key doctrine actually valid, even in a partial sense, according to the Writings?
- 2) What does Baha'u'llah say about the principles or purposes by which the Message is given in each Dispensation?
- 3) Can we discover actual evidence of these principles and purposes in the teachings and laws of earlier Holy Books, as well as in the historical circumstances that existed in earlier Dispensations?
- 4) By establishing these principles and purposes, and putting them in historical contexts, can we better understand the relation between one Dispensation and another? Can we better understand why they are both the same and different?
- 5) By looking at the evidence of the teachings and laws of the various Dispensations, can we come to a better understanding of why some Dispensations were longer or shorter in duration, compared to others?

First Point

The first point to recognize about progressive revelation, and the first step towards resolving the problems we have identified, is that this doctrine is *wholly inseparable* from the Baha'i concept of the "Manifestation of God", Who has *two stations*, according to Baha'u'llah:

These Manifestations of God have each a twofold station. *One is the station of pure abstraction and essential unity.* In this respect, if thou callest them all by one name, and dost ascribe to them the same attribute, thou hast not erred from the truth...For they one and all summon the people of the earth to acknowledge the Unity of God, and herald unto them the Kawthar of an infinite grace and bounty. They are all invested with the robe of Prophethood, and honored with the mantle of glory. (Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i-Iqan*, II:60)

Second Station: Station of Distinction

“The other [station] is the station of distinction, and *pertaineth to the world of creation and to the limitations thereof*. In this respect, each Manifestation of God *hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined Revelation, and specially designated limitations*. Each one of them is known by a different name, *is characterized by a special attribute, fulfills a definite Mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation....It is because of this difference in their station and mission* that the words and utterances flowing from these Wellsprings of divine knowledge appear to diverge and differ.” (Baha’u’llah, *Kitab-i-Iqan* II:90, 91)

Station of Distinction in Hidden Words

In one of the *Hidden Words*, which is intended a distillation of all the teachings of the past, Baha'u'llah writes:

“O SON OF BEAUTY!

By My spirit and by My favor! By My mercy and by My beauty! All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, *hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice.*” (Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words*, A. #67)

Station of Distinction II

“Consider that which hath been sent down unto Muhammad, the Apostle of God. The measure of the Revelation of which He was the bearer had been clearly foreordained by Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Powerful. They that heard Him, however, *could apprehend His purpose only to the extent of their station and spiritual capacity.* He, in like manner, uncovered the Face of Wisdom *in proportion to their ability to sustain the burden of His Message.*” (Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings XXXIII:77*)

Station of Distinction III

“Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men *in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity.*” (Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings XXXVIII:87*)

“In like manner, every time the Prophets of God have illumined the world with the resplendent radiance of the Day Star of Divine knowledge, they have invariably summoned its peoples to embrace the light of God through such means *as best befitted the exigencies of the age in which they appeared.*” (Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings XXXIV:80*)

Station of Distinction IV

“The measure of the revelation of the Prophets of God in this world, however, must differ. Each and every one of them hath been the Bearer of a distinct Message, and hath been commissioned to reveal Himself through specific acts.....It is clear and evident, therefore, that any apparent variation in the intensity of their light is not inherent in the light itself, but should rather be attributed to the varying receptivity of an ever-changing world. Every Prophet Whom the Almighty and Peerless Creator hath purposed to send to the peoples of the earth hath been entrusted with a Message, and charged to act in a manner that would best meet the requirements of the age in which He appeared.”
(Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings*, XXXIV:79).

Station of Distinction V

These attributes of God are not, and have never been, vouchsafed specially unto certain Prophets, and withheld from others. Nay, all the Prophets of God, His well-favored, His holy and chosen Messengers are, without exception, the bearers of His names, and the embodiments of His attributes. ...It hath, therefore, become manifest and evident that within the tabernacles of these Prophets and chosen Ones of God the light of His infinite names and exalted attributes hath been reflected, *even though the light of some of these attributes may or may not be outwardly revealed from these luminous Temples to the eyes of men.* That a certain attribute of God hath not been outwardly manifested by these Essences of Detachment *doth in no wise imply that they who are the Day Springs of God's attributes and the Treasuries of His holy names did not actually possess it.*
(Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings* XIX:48)

Purpose of the Manifestations

“God’s purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. *The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding.* The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established.” (Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings*, XXXIV:80)

According to Baha’i teaching, one meaning of “darkness” (or the ‘clouds’ which accompany each advent) is the interpolations, misinterpretations, distortions and mis-applications of the divine teachings that appear in each Dispensation *after* the time of the Manifestation. Since interpolations, misinterpretations and mis-applications are all the product of circumstances and dynamic cultures, and such ever-changing cultures are different from one another, this suggests that the interpolations, misinterpretations, distortions and mis-applications that appear in each Dispensation, and even in each *region*, will be *unique*, and are not the same as those that pervade other religions, though all are motivated by a combination of ignorance and attachment.

Major Points

- 1) God never speaks to mankind according to His understanding, but according to that of man.
- 2) Every Messenger, in respect to the station of distinction, appears with a *particular* Revelation, and Each has specific *limitations*
- 3) The particular Revelation and limitations of a Manifestation of God *pertain to the world* (i.e. to the maximum geographic spread of the teachings throughout that Dispensation)
- 4) The Manifestations give their Message according to the spiritual capacity of the people
- 5) The Manifestations reveal that which is needed, according to the exigencies of the time
- 6) The Manifestations are commissioned by God to speak and act in specific ways, according to the receptivity of mankind.
- 7) All the Manifestation possess all the Names and Attributes of God, *even if one or many of them are not actually revealed* in a given Dispensation.
- 8) The Manifestations come to liberate the people from darkness (i.e. the specific forms of darkness that pervades, or will pervade, that society or those regions throughout that given age.)
- 9) The people of every age can only understand the Message in direct proportion to their individual capacity.

What is *Not* Said

In these many passages, Baha'u'llah *does not* say that each Revelation is given specifically or primarily in order to advance the law and teachings of the previous Dispensation.

This suggests that the term 'Progressive Revelation' *does not primarily* pertain to advancing the law and the teaching of past Dispensations; that is, the laws and teachings of those past Dispensations *are not necessarily the starting point* when a new Dispensation begins. The doctrine means that, somewhat irrespective of what has been revealed in earlier times, each Revelation is intended to *move human civilization forward* to the maximum possible extent, given the conditions of the age (i.e., the whole of the given Dispensation), the region in which a Manifestation appears, and the cultures and beliefs within that region.

Additional Factors

Baha'u'llah has thus revealed that, with respect to the second station, each Manifestation gives His Message according to the needs of the time and the conditions of the people; however, such needs and conditions are, theoretically at least, dependent on certain *additional factors*:

- 1) Historic low populations, especially in certain regions of the world at various times; the lower the population, the more isolated the society tends to be.
- 2) Not all past religions were *missionary religions* in their design (i.e. Judaism, Hinduism), or were not practiced as such in certain times or regions due to social, economic, political, contractual, religious or legal circumstances (i.e., Zoroastrians in India; Buddhists after the time of Ashoka?); this prevented certain religious societies and cultures from interacting with others in a major way, or forced them to turn completely inward. Such religious societies thus became opaque to others.

Additional Factors II

- 3) In the past, for many thousands of years, technological and geographic barriers often prevented peoples of certain regions from interacting regularly or intensely with other lands, meaning that their cultures and perspectives mainly developed independently and in some isolation from others; this, to a certain extent, dictated the language which the Manifestations had to use whensoever they appeared in those areas (i.e., the Buddha in Vedic India), and also made it difficult for people of those regions to accept the teachings of later Manifestations Who appeared outside that context.
- 4) Man-made fears, such as racial, political, linguistic, and economic prejudices, trade disputes, differing levels of civil or economic development, and past military conflicts also caused separations between peoples of different religious traditions, and thus forced some cultures, and the religions that were integral to them, to further diverge from others.

Two Themes

Though this topic properly would require much more examples, and much deeper historical analysis, we have chosen the following two themes found in religious teaching as a means of demonstrating our argument:

1) Prevalence of Law

2) Attitude to Science

Point of Remembrance

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4)

“The real temple is the very Word of God; for to it all humanity must turn, and it is the center of unity for all mankind. It is the collective center, the cause of accord and communion of hearts, the sign of the solidarity of the human race, the source of eternal life.”
(‘Abdu’l-Baha’, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 65)

I. Prevalence of Law

- 1) How fundamental, or how prevalent, is law (i.e. religious customs, ceremonies, the calendar, practices, institutions, government, religious courts, etc.) in the different Dispensations, as compared to other aspects of the teachings (i.e., ethics, eschatology, theology, metaphysical ontology, philosophy, psychology, mysticism, theory of history)? Is the law *entirely* ethical, or does it have some ritual, civil, dietary or other components?
- 2) How broad is law in the different Dispensations, *as they were originally established*? Are there laws covering all aspects of life (i.e., dietary, daily schedules, family life, civil affairs, commerce, taxes, international relations, etc.) in great degree, or do the laws of a given Dispensation cover only certain aspects of life in limited degrees?

The Law in Zoroastrianism

*“Who among my kinsman, who among my friends, shall live by Thy Laws
And bring recognition of Thy Faith among the people?” (Gathas 49:7)*

- Based (at least in principle) on the ethical principle of “Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds”; purposed to reduce the Vedic ritualism of the *Magi* (pre-Zoroastrian priests)
- Little law in the authentic *Gathas*, except for cosmo-ethical-eschatological precepts and state religious policy (official toleration); *Ahura Mazda* is not primarily a lawgiver
- Law in other parts of the later *Avesta* is often archaic. The sophisticated system of Zoroastrian law chiefly developed during the Sasanid period, long after Zarathushtra, based on the Avesta, Persian customary law and the ordinances of the Archaemenid and Parthian kings, under the direction of Sasanid priests. Judgements reached by consensus.
- Included ethics, calendrical reform, religious ritual, family law, marriage, inheritance.

The Law in Mosaic Judaism (*Halakha*)

- 613 Commandments in the Torah, including the ‘Decalogue’, 248 positive and 365 negative; of the 613, only 244 have been determined by the Rabbis to apply to Jews living today outside Israel
- Sources: Written Torah (an edited amalgamation of the Abrahamic *and* Mosaic Revelations dating from 6th century B.C.) and Oral Torah (i.e. the *Mishnah*); the *Talmud* (Jerusalem and Babylonian) contains rabbinical debates concerning the application and interpretation of the law. Administered by local Rabbis, or the Rabbinical courts
- Provisions concern the attitude to God and the Torah itself; religious ritual (circumcision, *tzitzit*); prayer, ethics, charity, treatment of non-Jews, marriage and family, sexual relations, the calendar, diet, commerce, treatment of underlings, Sabbatical years, courts, property rights, criminal law, idolators, agriculture, clothing, the *Levites*, taxes, the Temple, sacrifices, and many other matters
- Orthodox or Conservative Jews hold that *Halakha* (“the way to go or walk”) is binding, but the application of it evolves through the Rabbis; Reconstructionist or Reformist Jews hold that *halakha* is not meaningful for most contemporary Jews.

Obedience to Law in Judaism

“If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and awful Name, the LORD thy God; ***then the LORD will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, even great plagues, and of long continuance, and sore sicknesses, and of long continuance. And He will bring back upon thee all the diseases of Egypt, which thou wast in dread of; and they shall cleave unto thee.*** Also every sickness, and every plague, which is not written in the book of this law, them will the LORD bring upon thee, until thou be destroyed. And ye shall be left few in number, whereas ye were as the stars of heaven for multitude; because thou didst not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God.” (Devarim [Deuteronomy] 28:58-62)

Law (*Nomos*) in Christianity: Key Points

- 1) The New Testament contains very little actual law or legislation, especially *unique* law, outside ethical prescription; if we confine ourselves to the Gospels, there is even less. The Gospels do, however, contain a new *covenant*, which is sealed with the believers through the crucifixion.
- 2) In certain of the Gospels, as well as in the letters, at least *some* of the laws from Judaism, such as some from the Decalogue, are specifically affirmed, but an exact account of all those that are binding is not provided.
- 3) Unique laws in Christianity: Divorce prohibited in most circumstances; Law of Sabbath annulled; Practice of Circumcision abandoned; Celebrate the Eucharist; Do not be seen eating food offered to idols; Apostles established as judges; Bishops, elders, presbyters and deacons established as *non-priestly* leaders of the church; Activity and authority of women circumscribed in the church.
- 4) As in Judaism, those laws which do exist must be obeyed, though Paul does distinguish between divine law and the commandments which he issues.
- 5) As in the Jewish *Shema*, spirit, faith, love of God and detachment from the world is more important than obedience to law alone.

Yeshua on the Mosaic Law

“Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, ‘Master, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus said unto him, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” ***On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.***” (Matthew 22:35-40)

“And a certain ruler asked him, saying, ‘Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said unto him ‘Thou knowest the commandments, “Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother.”’ And he said, ‘All these have I kept from my youth up.’ Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, ***Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me.***” (Luke 18:18-19a, 20-22)

Paul on the Mosaic Law

A man with a shaved head and a red tunic is seated at a wooden desk, writing with a quill. The desk is cluttered with several open books, a rolled-up scroll, and some loose papers. The background is dark and indistinct.

Since Christ gave His community very little new law, abolished certain of the Mosaic laws (i.e. divorce, the Sabbath), reduced the law in a sense to the twin principles of love of God and love of neighbour, emphasized faith in God and the new covenant, and was even crucified under the law, Paul seemed to hold that the Mosaic law was only good and perfect as a means to regulate some behaviour, but rigidly following the totality of it for the sake of salvation was mere legalism (reliance on the letter of the law alone, not faith or love), and against the universalism of Christ Himself and the Gospel; thus the law, by itself, could no longer be the primary path to salvation in the new age.

Law (*Shari'ah*) in Islam

- Four Sources: the Qur'an, *Sunnah* (authentic *hadith*), *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning), and *Ijma* (juridical consensus); Among the *Shi'ih* branch, the four sources are the Qur'an, *Sunnah* (including *hadith* of the Imams), consensus and the intellect (or reason).
- About 350-500 verses of the Qur'an (out of 6236 total) concern the *Shari'ah* (meaning "The Way"); some of these concern *Muqasid*, or the *philosophy* and *purpose* of law. The bulk of *Shar'iah* is based on *hadith* and the other 2 sources
- Four Sunni schools of Islamic law (*Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i*, and *Hanbali*) and three main *Shi'ih* schools: *Isna Ashari* or *Ja-Afri*, *Ismaili* and *Zaydiya*
- As in Jewish law, provisions cover personal, family, ritual, civil, criminal, mercantile, evidentiary, constitutional, and international law.
- For most traditional Muslims worldwide, the essence of being a good Muslim is strict adherence to the *Shar'iah* through one of the recognized schools, which tend to be regional.

The Law in the Baha'i Faith

- Mainly contained in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* (“Most Holy Book”), in certain Tablets of Baha’u’llah, the *Will and Testament* of ‘Abdu’l-Baha’, in Tablets of the Master, and letters of both Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice; legal traditions or interpretations outside these sources unauthoritative.
- Development of law is understood to be *continuous* through the legislation of the Universal House of Justice, at least until the time of the next Manifestation; hence, Baha’i law will be much more vast in the future.
- Concerns successorship, institutions (the local Assembly, marriage, the *Mashriq’ul-Adkar*), ethics, the *Right of God*, fasting, inheritance, Holy Days, Feasts, prohibitions (i.e. alcohol, intoxicating substances), rituals (i.e. prayer for the dead, obligatory prayer, pilgrimage), civil affairs, etc.
- In many cases, how or when a particular law is followed is left to the prerogative of the individual believer; other laws administered by the Houses of Justice.

Assessment

The element of divine law thus seems to be quite strong in Judaism, Islam and the Baha'i Faith, both in the authoritative texts, and in practice, but it is *not* deeply emphasized in either original Zoroastrianism or Christianity.

Given this evidence, and looking at the matter chronologically, the question we need to ask is this: within the context of 'Progressive Revelation', how should we understand the fact that law is very prevalent, broad and detailed in Judaism (especially in Mosaism), mostly non-existent in original Zoroastrianism, nearly absent in Christianity, prevalent again in Islam, and prominent once more in the Baha'i Faith? Christians would see the *re-imposition* of a legal code, as found in Islam and the Baha'i Faith, as a *regression*, and *anti-libertarian*, not as a progression. Some Jews, on the other hand, would not see Christianity as a revelation at all, *precisely because* it abandons most of the Jewish law, alters other parts, and emphasizes faith. Jews would thus have greater affinity with Islam.

Historical Contextualization I: Zoroastrianism

As far as we can tell from the Zoroastrian Scriptures, the kingdom of Zarathushtra's royal patron, Vishtaspa, seemed to have been well-governed and stable. Moreover, Zoroaster's Dispensation was ordained to last only about 500 years, until the time of the Buddha; Zoroastrian Empires and law came much later. His Mission was primarily to turn the agrarian society and the governments of His time away from the Vedic ritual of the *Magi* toward true worship and an ethics based on *Arta*, or the cosmic principle of the Good, created by Ahura Mazda.

Historical Contextualization II: Christianity

At the time of Christianity, and throughout most of that Dispensation, the Roman Empire (both the Western and the Byzantine) provided the organizational, governmental and legal structure in which Christianity could develop and thrive, and which it would slowly reform, both religiously and ethically. Similar to Zoroastrianism, the Christian Dispensation was pre-ordained to last only 600 years.

Historical Contextualization III: Judaism and Islam

In both Mosaic Judaism, as well as in Islam, due to outer conditions, the Messenger had to forge the ethical, organizational, civil, religious and legal foundations for the new and lasting society He was creating, because no other acceptable or viable foundation or law for that society existed at the time. (It should be noted that Moses appeared in about 1750 B.C., *before* the time when written law was common.) Without this foundation, the religion would die out and civilization would not progress. The Dispensation of *Moshe* was to last around 750 years, until the time of Zarathushtra, and was confined mainly to the Levant, while that of Islam was to last 1260 lunar years, until the Declaration of the Bab, and was to spread throughout Afro-Eurasia.

Historical Contextualization IV: the Baha'i Faith

Due to the existing needs of humanity in this era, the Baha'i teachings aim to create a world society or commonwealth, which has never before existed at any time in history; thus, again, no existing structure, system, philosophy, ideology or series of institutions can be utilized. Therefore, laws concerning ethics, practices, civil affairs, the calendar, courts, governmental structures and international order are all necessary. Moreover, the Baha'i Dispensation, like that of Islam, is to last 1000 years at least.

Two Principle Factors

Based on our limited and very non-scholarly survey, it seems that the emphasis on law, in certain Dispensations at least, seems to depend, at least partially, on two factors:

- 1) The projected length of the given Dispensation (which, of course, was often only fully known by God at the time it was initiated)
- 2) The necessity to create a new civil order, based upon faith and divine law, rather than reform existing civil orders and structures through a system of revealed ethics.

Both these factors ultimately depend on the spiritual capacity of man, for our spiritual capacities (or lack thereof) determine: 1) *When* a new Dispensation is needed; 2) *Whether* we are able to establish a viable and complementary civil structure on our own; 3) *Whether* we can reform existing structures to the degree necessary; or 4) *Whether* we are able to *establish* and *maintain* a structure which God has designed until the eschatological term runs its course.

II. Science in Religious Dispensations

For this second section, we are not interested in prophecies concerning specific scientific phenomena or discoveries, as found in certain Holy Books; we are looking for teachings, ethics or laws about the actual *status* or *importance* of science as a discipline, statements concerning the *philosophy* of science, or those which encourage the development of science as a valid means to obtain knowledge about the world.

Definition of Science

Though science, as we currently define it, did not exist in the ancient world, peoples and cultures around the globe (i.e. the Elamites, the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Harappans, the Chinese) did nonetheless develop knowledge of natural processes and rational abstract concepts (i.e. mathematics) in ancient times, and utilized them to create major civilizations, and all the artifacts thereof.

For our purposes, we would define “science” as:

The detached, rational and systematic discipline of study which rationally investigates all existing phenomena without fear in order to obtain genuine knowledge, and which proceeds through the stages of observation, theorization, design, test or experiment, and finally assessment. Defined this way, “science” is separated from “ancient knowledge” which was often not rational or systematic, knew little about ‘natural laws’, and was pervaded by mythology, magic, mysticism, or religious teaching.

Ethical/Philosophic Foundations of Modern Science

- 1) A mind free of mythology, superstition, preconceptions, and pseudo-science
- 2) Trust in our own observational and rational powers
- 3) Trust that all of nature operates universally through consistent causes and effects
- 4) Love of the truth
- 5) Respect for all that exists, and as it exists
- 6) Desire to turn our powers of reason and observation upon all that exists to discover truth

Seeds of Science in Zoroastrianism

“He who abhors and shuns the light of the Sun, **He who refuses to behold with respect the living creation of God...**An enemy of my faith, a destroyer of Thy principles is he, O Lord!” (*Gathas* 32:10)

“Thou [Ahura Mazda] hast created this world *for our satisfaction..*”(*Gathas* 47:3)

“Let man be active, *zealously caring for his land and creatures so that they may flourish.*” (*Gathas* 48:5)

Seeds of Science in Judaism

“I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ***Thou shalt have no other gods before me.***” (Exodus 20:2-3)

“And God said, ‘*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.*’ So God created man *in his own image, in the image of God* created he him; male and female created he them.” (Genesis 1:26-7)

“***The heavens are telling of the glory of God;*** And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.” (Psalm 19:1)

“Great are the works of the Lord; ***They are studied by all who delight in them.***” (Psalm 111:2)

“Come now, ***and let us reason together,*** saith the LORD..” (Isaiah 1:18)

Seeds of Science in Christianity

“But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him..” (I Corinthians 8:6)

“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, ***being understood through what has been made***, so that they are without excuse.” (Romans 1:20)

“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” (I Thess. 5:21)

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” (Phil. 4:8)

Rejection of Polytheism and Idolatry in Islam

“Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.” (Q. 112)

“When it is said to them: ‘Follow what Allah hath revealed’. they say: ‘Nay we shall follow the ways of our fathers’. What! Even though their fathers were void of wisdom and guidance?” (Q. 2:170)

“When it is said to them: Come to what Allah hath revealed; come to the messenger, they say: ‘Enough for us are the ways we found our fathers following’. What! Even though their fathers were void of knowledge and guidance?” (Q. 5:104)

“The parable of those who reject faith is as if one were to shout like a goat-herd, to things that listen to nothing but calls and cries: deaf, dumb and blind. They are void of wisdom.” (Q. 2:171)

Seeds of Science in the Qur'an

“We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them, merely in (idle) sport. We created them not except for just ends: But most of them do not understand..” (Q. 2:44).

“Many were the Ways of Life that have passed away before you: travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who rejected truth.” (Q. 3:137).

“Say: ‘Travel through the earth and see how Allah did originate creation’” (Q. 29:20).

“Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare His Praises and Glory..” (Q. 59:24).

“No want of proportion wilt thou see in the Creation of (Allah) Most Gracious, so turn thy vision again: Seest thou any flaw?” (Q. 67:3)

“He has made subject to you the Night and the Day; the Sun and the Moon; and the Stars are in subjection by His Command: verily in this are Signs for men who are wise.” (Q. 16:12)

Seeds Re-affirmed by Baha'u'llah

“Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch *as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.*” (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings* XC:177)

O Son of Man! Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, ***have engraved on thee Mine image*** and revealed to thee My beauty. (Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words*, Arabic #3)

Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein. It will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it and will give thee such clear explanations as to make thee independent of every eloquent expounder. (Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 141-2)

“The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, ***discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye.***” (Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, X.)

A New Theo-Philosophy of Science

The virtues of humanity are many, but science is the most noble of them all. ... It is a bestowal of God; it is not material; it is divine. Science is an effulgence of the Sun of Reality, the power of investigating and discovering the verities of the universe, the means by which man finds a pathway to God. All the powers and attributes of man are human and hereditary in origin -- outcomes of nature's processes -- except the intellect, which is supernatural. Through intellectual and intelligent inquiry science is the discoverer of all things. It unites present and past, reveals the history of bygone nations and events, and confers upon man today the essence of all human knowledge and attainment throughout the ages. By intellectual processes and logical deductions of reason this superpower in man can penetrate the mysteries of the future and anticipate its happenings. ('Abdu'l-Baha', *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 49)

Science in the Baha'i Faith

“And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that **religion must be in conformity with science and reason**, so that it may influence the hearts of men. The foundation must be solid and must not consist of imitations.” (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha'*, 227., p. 299)

Historical Contextualization: Science

- In Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity, we find only veiled hints of the future scientific enterprise, sometimes couched in purely *ethical* terms, or no hints at all, because man had not yet reached the spiritual capacity that would be necessary to abandon the ancient, all-pervasive, mythological and polytheistic view of the world, and adopt a more rational, systematic, enlightened, and detached approach. To prove this, we need look no further than, for example, the stories about the 10 plagues in Exodus, or the miracle stories that pervade the Gospels.
- In Islam, there is a major shift: not only does the Qur'an, as a revealed Book, encourage believers to look at nature (as found in the Psalms), to care for it as a bounty of God (as in the *Gathas*), and teach that the signs or attributes of God are hidden therein (as we see in St. Paul), the Qur'an also specifically encourages *rational thought with respect to the material world* and the full abandonment of both idolatry (in all its forms) and ignorance.

Historical Contextualization: Science in the Baha'i Dispensation

In the Baha'i Faith, there is another major progression concerning science, or that discipline which the Revelation of Islam had unleashed upon the world: first, it explicitly exalts science and scientific thinking; secondly, it teaches that science and religion, reason and mysticism, must be fully reconciled with one another, thus bringing the twin forces of belief and rationality within man into complete balance.

We see this explicit emphasis on balance between religion and science in this Dispensation, and not in the teachings of Islam, because it was only in the 19th and 20th centuries (the same period in which the Faith appeared and developed) that our scientific and technological development far surpassed our spiritual and ethical attainments, thus leading to the possibility of nuclear self-annihilation or global environmental destruction. Only if religion is renewed and the balance restored can the ideology of scientism (i.e., the glorification and pursuit of science entirely for its own sake, regardless of consequences) be abolished, the discipline of economics transformed, war permanently ended, and science placed in its proper context: the glorification of God and service to the true interests of humanity as a whole.

Other Issues

- Emphasis on meditation and *moksha* (liberation) in Hinduism and Buddhism; emphasis on *salvation*, but comparatively little discussion of *meditation* in most Abrahamic traditions
- Apparent Polytheism in the Vedas of Hinduism; Apparent agnosticism in Buddhism; monotheism in Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam and the Baha'i Faith
- Doctrine of *Anatta* ("No-self") in Buddhism; fundamental assumption of self-hood in Abrahamic traditions
- The six primary *Amesh Spenta* (Holy Immortals) in Zoroastrianism; the Absolute Oneness of God in the Abrahamic traditions
- Incarnation and Trinity doctrines in post-Constantinian Christianity; rejection of these doctrines in Judaism, Islam and the Baha'i Faith
- Emphasis on missionary teaching in some traditions (i.e., Christianity, the Baha'i Faith); lack of such emphasis in others (i.e., Judaism, Buddhism).

Conclusion

- In agreement with Baha'u'llah's statements concerning the second station of the Manifestation of God, but against a simplified understanding of the doctrine, Progressive Revelation is not primarily relative to itself (i.e. the teachings, laws and doctrines of previous Dispensations), but is rather mainly relative to the needs and conditions of mankind in that given age (i.e., the entire breadth of that Dispensation) and the region (or regions) in which that Dispensation will be established during the given eschatological period.
- The needs of mankind in any given age is likely the reason why there is such temporal fluctuation between one Dispensational advent and another.
- Seen in this light, a better understanding of the doctrine of progressive revelation, combined with historical contextualization, can help us to comprehend the apparent differences between one revelation and those which came both before it and after it.

Final Thoughts

- We do not pretend in any way that we have *fully* explained all the facets and workings of progressive revelation; we have only noted its basic features, its spiritual importance, and looked at how one aspect of the doctrine is demonstrated within several successive dispensations, and this only with respect to two major themes.
- Very possibly, once Baha'u'llah's doctrine of "Progressive Revelation" is more thoroughly explicated by Baha'i scholars in the future, under the guidance of the House of Justice, it will spawn a whole new area of historiography in Baha'i academia, which will examine in much more detail how history, geography, language, conflicts, politics, technology, social conditions, various religious schools, disbelief and other factors have influenced or shaped all divine revelations of the past, and how these successive revelations have, in turn, guided all aspects of human development throughout the Adamic Cycle, despite these many hindrances.



Questions?