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Wittgensteinian Language-Games in an Indo-Persian Dialogue on the World Religions

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Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (d. 1892), founder of the Baha'i religion in Iran and known to his followers as Baha'u'llah, responded in the late 1870s to questions about Hinduism (and Zoroastrianism) put to him by the Zoroastrian agent in Iran, Manakji Limji Hataria (1813-1890). Manakji's questions about Hinduism are posed as a general problem of how to understand the varying doctrines and truth-claims of the great world religions, and this, too, is a question Nuri addresses here. I see a strong resemblance between Nuri's way of speaking about the diverse theologies of previous religions and the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of "language games." These questions and Nuri's replies are contained in a letter sent to one of Nuri's major disciples, Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani (1844-1914). The subjects discussed center on comparative religions, and Manakji repeatedly outlines what he understands to be Hindu doctrines and asks for Nuri's responses to

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them. I should say at the outset that these responses tended to be oblique, with much remaining implicit, but that they do clearly constitute a dialogue of Nuri with Hinduism, as well as with the other traditions covered. Here I am most interested in the former. The letter to Mirza Abu'l-Fadl, containing asides by Nuri's scribe, Mirza Aqa Jan Khadimu'llah, was printed in volume seven of the anthology, *The Heavenly Repast (Ma'idih-'i Asmani)* in 1972 or 1973 by the Iranian Baha'i scholar, 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari.¹ The tablet brings to the fore questions of what Nuri means by the unity of the world religions, and how he approaches this subject theologically and philosophically.

Nuri proposed a theological universalism of sorts, recognizing the validity of the religions of Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Muslims. The relationship of Baha'ism to the Eastern traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism is more complex. Nuri's son and successor, 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921), during his missionary journeys to Europe and the United States extended that universalism to the South Asian religions, speaking of the Hindu figure Krishna as a 'prophet,' and of the Buddha as a major exponent of the universal truth.² His Western audiences of that time, influenced by Indian figures such as Swami Vivekananda and by the early twentieth century vogue for Buddhism, no doubt pressed him on whether Baha'i universalism extended to those traditions. Making Krishna, e.g., a prophet was not uncommon among Sufi masters in India, and both the Sufis and the Baha'is typically saw the Eastern traditions through the lens of the biblical and qur'anic notions of prophets, messengers and the one God.

Hinduism, India and Nineteenth-Century Iranian Culture

Zoroastrianism and Hinduism ultimately have a common origin in the religious ideas and myths of the Aryan or Indo-European peoples who

¹Husayn 'Ali Nuri, "Lawh-i Mubarak dar jav-ab-i 'Aridih-'i Jinab-i Abu'l-Fada'il-i Gulpay-gani," in *Maidih-'i Asmani*, ed. 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari (Tehran: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 129 B.E./1972-73), vol. 7, 148-173.

²'Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks* (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1969), 35; 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, rev. ed. 1981), 165-166. Buttruss from Compilation of Compilations.

gradually spread into eastern Iran at some unknown time (possibly as early as the third millennium BC) and then into India (around 1200 BC) and western Iran (after 1000 BC). Among the eastern, cow-herding Iranians of Khurasan and Sistan, a prophet arose named Zarathustra (Zoroaster to the Greeks) who authored the Gathas, hymns in an Old Persian that is close to Sanskrit. His birth date is impossible to know, and specialists have argued for such disparate centuries as 1200 BC and 600 BC. Zoroaster reformed the polytheistic Indo-Iranian religion, preaching one, ultimately triumphant good God who was engaged in a struggle with a doomed evil god for supremacy in the cosmos. Human beings were in the middle of the struggle and were obligated to enlist in the ranks of the good God by speaking only the truth, thinking good thoughts, and doing good deeds.

Many Zoroastrian ideas, such as its proto-monotheism, ethical precepts, belief in resurrection of the body, and the coming of a future prophet-savior, became influential among other Near Eastern religions. Zoroastrianism gradually became the majority religion in Iran, and was for the most part the state religion of the Sasanid dynasty (AD 224-636). The advent of Islam in Iran from the seventh century displaced Zoroastrianism; many priestly and noble families fled to Gujarat in India, becoming known as Parsis, and over the next four centuries most Zoroastrians in Iran became Muslims, on the whole voluntarily. Most Muslim jurists dismissed Zoroastrians as fire-worshippers and dualists, refusing to recognize them as fellow monotheists, or their prophet as a messenger of God. A small Zoroastrian community survived, especially around Yazd. In the nineteenth century, with the influence on Iran of European ideas about nationalism, many Iranian modernist intellectuals grew interested in the religion of their ancient past, and some even learned the Middle Persian or Pahlavi in which most of the commentaries on the ancient scriptures were written.

Hinduism is not so much a single religion as a vast set of religious and cultural practices pursued in India, most of them rooted in texts produced around 1200-

500 BC called the Vedas, the scriptures of the invading Aryan people who probably arrived in the subcontinent at the beginning of that period. The early gods and rituals of the Vedas were later expanded. Devotion grew up to the fabled prince Rama or Ram, with his loyal wife Sita and dedicated helper, the monkey-god Hanuman, as chronicled in the huge epic, the Ramayana. Important philosophical schools were created, such as that embodied in the pantheistic Upanishads and the Yoga schools. Around 200 BC an anonymous sage composed the beautiful *Bhagavad-Gita*, centering on the teachings of the divine Krishna (who is supposed to have lived around the tenth century BC). Although Hinduism went into a stark decline in India with the rise of the religion of the Buddha (563-483 BC), it experienced a widespread revival in the early medieval period, and gradually supplanted Buddhism in the land of its birth as well as surviving the immense impact of Islam from the eighth century onward. From about AD 1000 the most important Muslim conquerors derived from the Central Asian lands of what we would now call Iran, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Even though many of the invaders were Turkic, the court language they had adopted was Persian, and they introduced it into India as a *lingua franca*. Persian, an Indo-European language, had the advantage of being linguistically close to the Indian languages that had evolved from Sanskrit (such as Hindi), and so formed a useful medium of communication with their Hindu subjects for the Muslim states of the Delhi Sultanate, the Lodis, and the Mughals. Persian was to Muslim-ruled northern India, circa 1200-1835, what Latin was to medieval Europe.

Not only was Nuri familiar with Hinduism, but he clearly expected that his nineteenth-century, literate, Persian-speaking audience would be, as well. A substantial literature on Hinduism existed in Arabic and Persian, especially the latter given that Persian was the primary literary and governmental language of Muslim-ruled India between the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries, and continued to be vital in the subcontinent during Nuri's own lifetime. The great medieval Iranian savant Abu Rayhan Biruni (973-1048) authored, around AD 1030, a wide-ranging description of Hinduism that became a classic. Medieval

and early modern Muslim political ascendancy in North India led to a vast amount of translation from Sanskrit sources into Persian. Indeed, given the very large number of Hindu scribes and others fluent in Persian during this period, and the much smaller number of learned Brahmins with mastery of Sanskrit, many literate North Indian Hindus themselves probably read their holy books in Persian during Mughal times (1525-1803), though most would have had access to Prakrit versions, i.e. in vernacular languages.³

The number of Muslim scholars of Persian who collaborated with Hindu pandits in making Sanskrit works available in that language was considerable. Nizamu'd-Din Panipati rendered the widely influential *Yoga Vasistha* into Persian late in the sixteenth century at the behest of the then crown prince Jahangir (later a Mughal emperor). The Mughal prince Dara Shikuh (1615-1659) himself did much to expound Hindu tenets in Persian, as well as translating important works such as the Upanishads.⁴ Since many Hindus also wrote in or translated into Persian, very large numbers of such manuscripts circulated among the literate classes, and many of these books demonstrably reached Iran. Persian descriptions of Hinduism, though varying in quality, were also quite numerous. An example of this literature is the anonymous *School of Religions (Dabistan-i Madhahib)*, which examines Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and both branches of Islam at some length, and includes a brief description of Christianity. The author was probably a Zoroastrian of Iranian extraction, brought up in Patna, North India. From the *School of Religions*, which was lithographed at least three times in the nineteenth century, a Persian-speaking reader could learn of the four ages (sing. *yuga*) into which

³Muhammad Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, *Kitab fi tahqiq mali al-Hind*, ed. Edward Sachau (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1925); Muhammad Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, *Albberuni India*, ed. Edward Sachau (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1910). For an overview, see Fathullah Mujtabai, *Aspects of Hindu Muslim Cultural Relations* (New Delhi: National Book Bureau, 1978).

⁴See *Sirr-i Akbar (Upanishad)*, trans. Dara Shikuh, ed. Tara Chand and S. M. Riza Jalali Na'ini (Tehran: Kitabkhanih-'i Tahuri, 1978); Dara Shikuh, *Muntakhab-i Athar*, ed. S. M. Riza Jalali Na'ini (Tehran: Taban, 1958); Bikram Jit Hasrat, *Dara Shikuh, Life and Works* (2ed ed.; New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1982 [first published 1943]).

Hindus divided the history of the current universe, the first of which lasted about 1.7 million years and the last of which (our own) will endure for 400,000 years. Such a cycle, over four million years long, itself formed a small part of mega-cycles, each of them a day in the life of the god Brahma. The author also described the Hindu belief in an ultimate Lord or God beyond the gods, called Visnu, and His self-manifestation in a series of ten avatars. He reports that:

They therefore assert, that for the purpose of satisfying the wishes of his faithful servants, and tranquillizing their minds, he has vouchsafed to manifest himself in this abode, which manifestations they call an Avatar and hold this to be no degradation to his essence . . . they have said, ‘Avatars are rays issuing from Vishnu’s essence.’ But these sectaries do not mean that the identical spirit of Ram, on the dissolution of its connection with his body, becomes attached to the body of Krishna.⁵

The vast Persian literature on India was also widely read in Iran itself. Mansoureh Ettehadieh Nizam-Mafi has demonstrated that of the 48,439 manuscripts calligraphed in the Qajar period according to the bibliographer Munzavi, 1,538 (comprising 309 distinct titles) consisted of histories of India. Of these, 751 were written prior to the late eighteenth century and subsequently recopied, and 787 were authored during the Qajar era. Only 1,986 manuscripts were produced on Iranian history in this period. Thus, about 44 percent of all history manuscripts produced in Iran during the Qajar era were about India! And we have not considered the many other categories of manuscripts that might treat Hinduism extensively, including the History of Religions, Legends and Stories, and Mysticism. Moreover, in the nineteenth century at least 912 Persian books were printed in India, many of them dealing with Indian and Hindu themes, compared with 2,569

⁵*The Dabistan or School of Manners*, trans. David Shea and Anthony Troyer (Washington and London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901), 183-184, 196; [Kay-Khusrau Isfandiyar], *Dabistan-I Madhahib*, ed. Rahim Rizazadih Ma-

lik, 2 vols. (Tehran: Kitabkhanih-‘I Tahir, 1983), 127-128, 134; cf. Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 228-233.

books printed in all of Iran. All of this is to say that India bulked large in the educated Iranian imagination in the nineteenth century, and knowledge of it and Hinduism was quite common among readers.⁶

This general phenomenon can be witnessed in Babi-Baha'i circles, as well. Two of the major Babi leaders, Sayyid Hindi and Sayyid Sa'id Basir, were from what was then British India. The early Baha'i historian Asadu'llah Fadil Mazandarani says of Sayyid Hindi that

he was a man who engaged in spiritual discipline and had arrived at exalted spiritual stations. He was learned in the sciences of the Muslims and the Hindus, as well as other peoples and communities. He produced sermons, prayers and verses. He considered himself to be in contact with the inner mystery of the most high Lord and to be inspired from the realm above. He applied wondrous [Babi] disciplines and ideas, especially those pertaining to raj'At [the return of personality attributes], to the philosophy of the Hindus, and he promulgated the doctrine of reincarnation.⁷

Mazandarani adds that Sayyid Hindi was close to Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri. Thus, a quite wide-ranging importation of Hindu ideas into Babism had been effected in the late 1840s and early 1850s, though these were mediated by South Asian Sufism, and Nuri certainly was intimately aware of Sayyid Hindi's writings. In one composite manuscript of Babi and Baha'i material that came into British Orientalist E.G. Browne's possession, a "Persian account of the Indian Saint Ramchand" is sandwiched among works by 'Abdu'l-Baha and Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani, and other Babi and Baha'i writers, indicating

⁶Mansoureh Ettehadieh Nizam-Mafi, "The Emergence of Tehran as the Cultural Center of Iran," in *Tehéran: Capitale Bicentenaire*, eds. C. Adle and B. Hourcade (Paris and Tehran: Institut Francais de Recherche en Iran, 1992), 133-138. I suspect the author and her

bibliographical source may even have underestimated the Indian total for Persian printed books.

⁷Asadu'llah Fadil Mazandarani, *Tarikh-i Zuhur al-Haqq*, MS photocopy in Cole library, vol. 4, 10.

an interest in Hinduism among adherents of these movements.⁸ The Baha'i poet and constitutionalist, Shaykhu'r-Ra'is, who visited the Aqa Khan in Bombay in the late nineteenth century, wrote in a poem about the underlying unity of the religions: "The Hindu came walking gracefully, /Chanting, 'Ram, Ram,'/ From this saying the intent emerged:/ "There is no god but God.""⁹ Further, Nuri spent a little over a year at a Khalidi Naqshbandi convent in Sulaymaniyyah (now Iraqi Kurdistan) in the mid-1850s. The Khalidis were a branch of the Mujaddidi Naqshbandi order based in Delhi, and the former's founder, Mawlana Khalid Shahrizuri, had studied in India with Shah 'Abdu'l-'Aziz. The Mujaddidis, such as Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan and Shah 'Abdu'l-'Aziz, accepted Hinduism as a true religion and saw its avatars as prophets in the Islamic sense. We cannot be sure that Nuri discussed Hinduism with his Naqshbandi friends, but here is another point at which he intersected with a local Muslim group sympathetic to aspects of Hinduism.

Nuri himself was familiar with at least some of the Persian literature on Hinduism. At one point he answers a questioner who asked about the paucity of records about human history before Adam, and here Nuri defends a "long chronology" wherein the world is of very great antiquity. He explains,

among existing historical records differences are to be found, and each of the various peoples of the world ha[s] its own account of the age of the earth and of its history. Some trace their history as far back as eight thousand years, others as far as twelve thousand years. To any one that ha[s] read the book of Juk it is clear and evident how much the accounts given by the various books have differed.¹⁰

⁸E. G. Browne and R. A. Nicholson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Oriental MSS. belonging to the late E. G. Browne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 66.

⁹Abu'l-Hasan Mirza Shaykhu'r-Ra'is, *Guzidih-'i az Surudih-ha-yi Shaykhu'r-Ra'is Qajar*, ed. Mir Jalalu'd-Din Kazzari (Tehran: Nashr-i Markaz, 1990), 123.

¹⁰Husayn 'Ali Nuri, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, trans. Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976 [1939]), 174; Husayn 'Ali Nuri, *Muntakhabati az Athar-i Hadrat-i Baha'u'llah* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Baha'i Verlag, 1984), 116.

The “book of Juk” could also be transliterated as the “book of Jug,” a reference to the Persian translation of the *Yoga Vasistha* (*Jug-Basisht*), a work on Hindu mysticism probably written in the thirteenth century CE. Cast in the form of a dialogue purportedly between the Vedic sage Vasistha and his pupil Rama, this work shows influences of Vedanta, Yoga and even Mahayana Buddhism. As noted above, Nizamu’-d-Din Panipati carried out a translation of this book in the late 1500s. The Safavid-era Iranian mystic Mir Findiriski (d. 1641) selected and commented on portions of Panipati’s rendering of the *Yoga Vasistha*. Mir Findiriski gained a reputation at the court of Shah ‘Abbas (r. 1588-1629) at early seventeenth-century Isfahan for asceticism, and he is said to have become, after his journeys in India, a vegetarian and an adorer of the sun who refused to go on pilgrimage to Mecca lest he be forced to sacrifice sheep.

The *Yoga Vasistha* appears to have been a popular work among those with Indo-Persian interests from about 1600 onward.¹¹ It contains passages discussing the untold cycles of time in which Hindus believed, the multiplicity of universes, and the end of each in a cosmic night. The long-lived sage, Bhusunda, is depicted as recalling a succession of 11,000-year epochs in the earth’s history before the advent of humans, when lava, forests, or demons predominated. He adds:

During my lifetime I have seen the appearance and disappearance of countless Manu[s] (the progenitor of the human race). At one time the world was devoid of the gods and demons, but was one radiant cosmic egg. At another time the earth was populated by brahmana (members of

¹¹The *Yoga Vasistha* exists in many versions, and the one that was translated into Persian was an abridged edition properly known as the *Laghu Yoga Vasistha*. See Fathullah Mujtabai, “Muntakhab-i Jug-basasht or, Selections from the *Yoga-vasistha* attributed to Mir Abu’l-Qasim Findiriski” (Harvard University, Ph.D. dissertation, 1976), esp. xxii-xxiii. For a modern English rendering of this work see *The Concise Yoga Vasistha*, trans. Swami Venkatesananda (Albany: State Uni-

versity of New York Press, 1984). For some analysis of its tales see Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 127-296. For Mir Findiriski, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Findiriski, Mir,” in EI2 Suppl. and Akbar Hadi Husaynabadi, *Sharh-i Hal-i Mir Damad va Mir Findiriski bi inzimam-i divan-i Mir Damad va qasidih-i Mir Findiriski* (Isfahan: Intisharat-i Maytham Timar, 1984), 57-163.

the priest class) who were addicted to alcohol, sudra (servant class) who ridiculed the gods, and polyandrous women. I also remember another epoch when the earth was covered with forests, when the ocean could not even be imagined, and when human beings were spontaneously created.¹²

Nuri's wording makes it clear that he was familiar with the *Yoga Vasistha*, and it is remarkable that he felt no need to explain the reference to his readers, suggesting again that many literate Persian-speaking intellectuals read this work as late as the nineteenth century.

Even more remarkable, Nuri clearly prefers the Yoga view of cosmology to a literal reading of the biblical-quranic short chronology, which would result in a world only six to eight thousand years old. Even the longer Zoroastrian figure for the age of the earth, 12,000 years, strikes him as too limited. I would suggest that the intellectual context for this insistence on a long chronology is three-fold. First, Nuri accepts the common Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic and Avicennian premise that the cosmos is eternal. This belief had remained a point of dispute in Islamic thought between the philosophically minded and the scripturalists. The great mystic and clergyman Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) had attacked the Muslim philosophers for daring to contradict a literal reading of the Qur'an, wherein the world was brought into being at a particular point in time by God's creative word and so is not eternal or pre-existent. The later Andalusian follower of Aristotle, Averroes, strongly defended his master, but to little avail in the Islamic West.¹³ In the Arab world, al-Ghazzali's view largely won out.

¹²e.g. *The Concise Yoga Vasistha*, 280-281, 72, 86-89 and 315. It would be useful to compare these English renderings with the Persian. I have not been able to find in the U.S. the major printed edition: *Jug-Bashist*, trans. Vali Ram, ed. Tara Chand and A. H. 'Abidi (Aligarh, 1968). Mir Findiriski's selections, edited by Mujtabai, do not include many cosmological references. Nuri at one point cites Mir Findiriski on the unknowability of God, confirming his knowledge of this thinker's

oeuvre: *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1977), 41.

¹³See Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Tahafut al-falāsifah. Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1958); Averroes, *Tahafut at-tahafut (The incoherence of the incoherence)*, trans. and intro. by Simon van den Bergh, 2 vols. (London: Luzac, 1954).

In Iran, however, the influence of the Avicennian peripatetics remained strong, so that many thinkers, Nuri among them, continued to accept the eternity of the universe. He wrote, in the letter that mentions the *Yoga Vasistha*, that God's "creation has ever existed, and the manifestations of his divine glory and the day springs of eternal holiness have been sent down from time immemorial."¹⁴

Second, some gnostic Shi'ite sayings attributed to the Imams speak of cycles of human history preceding that of Adam. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i cites a saying by Imam Muhammad Baqir that God created a thousand thousand worlds and a thousand thousand Adams and that we exist in the last of these worlds and the last of these Adamic cycles; elsewhere Shaykh Ahmad quotes Imam 'Ali, who was asked whether creatures existed who worshipped God before Adam, and is said to have replied, "Yes, there were in the heavens and on earth creatures of God who sang God's praises."¹⁵ Third, the discovery by nineteenth-century European geologists and paleontologists that the world, and life, is very old, was becoming known among Middle Eastern intellectuals from the 1870s, and by the 1880s Darwinism was beginning to create controversy at regional institutions such as the Syrian Protestant College (later the American University in Beirut).¹⁶ Both the philosophical view of the eternity of the world and the modern scientific chronology that pushed the earth's age back, first to millions and then to billions of years are relatively compatible with Hindu cosmology, but are impossible to reconcile with the short chronology of the biblical tradition if taken literally. For a nineteenth-century Middle Eastern thinker with a philosophical, inquiring bent, such as Nuri, the Yoga chronology was a useful foil to the more limited cosmological conceptions of Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic traditions.

¹⁴Nuri, *Gleanings*, 174; Nuri, *Muntakhabati az athar-i hadrat-i Baha'u'llah*, 116.

¹⁵Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i, "al-Kashkul," 2 vols., MSS Alif-9 and Alif-10, Kerman Shaykhi Library, on microfilm at the University of Michigan Harlan Hatcher Library, vol. 1, 117, for the saying by 'Ali. For the saying of Imam Muhammad Baqir, see

Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i, *Jawami' al-Kalim*, 2 vols. (Tabriz: Muhammad Taqi Nakhjavani, 1273-1276), vol. 1, i, 8:136.

¹⁶See Susan Ziadeh, "A Radical in his Time: The Thought of Shibli Shumayyil and Arab Intellectual Discourse (1882-1917)," (University of Michigan, PhD dissertation, 1991).

Manakji's Questions

Let us turn now to the correspondence between Manakji Limji Hataria and Nuri. Manakji was a Parsi, or Indian Zoroastrian, of the nineteenth century, born near Surat in northwestern India. From the age of fifteen he earned his own way, becoming a commercial agent, and he came to Iran in 1854 via the Gulf and Iraq. He met Nuri in Baghdad at that time (Nuri had been exiled from Iran by Nasir al-Din Shah in the early 1850s for his Babi leanings, in the wake of a Babi attempt on the life of the shah). In Yazd, Kirman and Tehran Manakji labored to restore the houses of worship of the Zoroastrians, to ameliorate the conditions of that people, and to found schools. In 1864, Manakji went back to India, and there he reported on the straitened conditions of Zoroastrians in Iran to his co-religionists. In British India, where Bombay spun a web of international commerce, the Zoroastrians had emerged as a wealthy community of merchants, agents, go-betweens and investors, enjoying religious freedom. Manakji Sahib ('Sahib' being an Indian honorific) convinced the Parsis to send him back to Tehran as their philanthropical agent. With Bombay monies, he and his wife opened three schools in Tehran, but they found they needed to hire outsiders as teachers. Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani, trained as a Shi'ite clergyman, lost his job as seminary teacher when he became a Baha'i in 1876, and took on employment from 1877-1882 as a teacher at Manakji's school and as the agent's secretary.¹⁷ It seems likely that the correspondence between Manakji and Nuri occurred sometime during this period. Another, shorter letter of Nuri to Manakji in pure Persian is better known and was even translated into English early in the twentieth century.¹⁸ Manakji, a great collector of Persian

¹⁷Mary Boyce, "Maneckji Limji Hataria in Iran," in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute Golden Jubilee Volume*, eds. Dastoor N. D. Minochehr-Homji and M. F. Kanga (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1969), 19-31; Susan Stiles, "Early Zoroastrian Conversions to Baha'ism in Yazd, Iran," in *Studies in Babi and Baha'i*, eds. Juan R. Cole and Moojan Momen (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1984), vol. 2, 70-

74. For another of Nuri's letters to a Zoroastrian leader, Ustad Javan Mard, see Shahriar Razavi, "The Tablet of the Seven Questions (*Lawh-i Haft Pursish*) of Nuri: An Introduction and Provisional Translation," with "Appendix" by Stephen Lambden, *Baha'i Studies Bulletin*, 7:3-4 (June 1993), 47-68.

¹⁸Husayn 'Ali Nuri, "Tablet to Manackji Sahib," *Star of the West*, 1:1 (12 March 1910), 5-9.

manuscripts, commissioned and edited a major chronicle of the Babi period, Mirza Husayn Hamadani's *New History of the Bab (Tarikh-i Jadid)*, which was completed around 1882.¹⁹

I will here present a commentary on the exchange between Nuri and Manakji, in hopes of understanding the codes of discourse being employed. Nuri signals at the very beginning that he felt it unwise to reply in a straightforward manner to some of the Parsi agent's direct questions, since he would have necessarily been forced openly to make pronouncements at variance with the doctrines held by the Shi'ite clergy in Iran. This issue arose because Nuri was writing to someone outside the Baha'i community, someone whose correspondence might be read by employees (including Shi'ites) were the letter to be shared or seen by others. Major points of interest are Nuri's attitudes to Zoroastrianism and Hinduism. He was clearly well-versed in the former, like some other nineteenth-century Iranian thinkers who looked upon the pre-Islamic religious heritage of Iran as a source of glory to be recovered. Many Iranians were excited by nineteenth-century archeological discoveries and decipherments concerning the ancient Achaemenids, Iranian rulers of most of the civilized world in the two centuries before the rise of Alexander the Great.

In his first question, Manakji outlines three possible types of sacred history, and asks Nuri which he prefers. The first type is the Zoroastrian, wherein, he says, it is maintained that there were altogether twenty-eight prophets, including Zoroaster himself. These prophets, he says, all affirmed the same religion, and none arose to abrogate the essential laws and customs of the community. Manakji derives this view of his tradition largely from the apocryphal *Dasatir*, a Sufi-influenced work of Zoroastrian mysticism probably produced in the seventeenth century CE, wherein sacred history

¹⁹Mirza Abu'l-Fadl, "A Treatise for Alexander Tumansky," in *Letters and Essays 1886-1913*, trans. J. Cole (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1985), 75-80; Mirza Husayn Hamadani, *The New History (Tarikh-i-Jadid) of Mirza 'Ali Muhammed, the Bab*, trans. E. G. Browne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893).

started with a very ancient figure named Mahabad, who was succeeded by other holy figures not mentioned in the ancient Zoroastrian scriptures. Many Parsis adhered to such a chronology in Manakji's own day.²⁰ This schema involves many prophets but one unchanging law.

In contrast, he says, Hindus conceive holy history in quite different terms. Manakji continues, "several of the bearers of a revelation to the Hindus said, 'I am God. All creatures must enter under My authority. When discord and alienation afflict them, I shall advent myself and efface it'".²¹ Without naming either, Manakji has here paraphrased for Nuri the words of Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*: "Though myself unborn, undying, the lord of creatures, I fashion nature, which is mine, and I come into being through my own magic. Whenever sacred duty decays and chaos prevails, then, I create myself, Arjuna. To protect men of virtue and destroy men who do evil, to set the standard of sacred duty, I appear in age after age."²² These Hindu avatars, Manakji explains, say that within them is the same soul that animated their predecessors. Further, they bring a new law.

Manakji makes an analogy between the Hindu schema (as he understands it) and that of the Judeo-Christian tradition, wherein Jesus abrogated the laws of Moses, who had in turn brought new laws not revealed in the time of Abraham. In regard to history, then, the Hindu cycle of successive avatars and the Christian belief in consecutive patriarchs and prophets leading up to the advent of Christ, have in common a doctrine that religious law can be changed by a new messenger of God. Manakji does not say so, but obviously Hinduism differs from the Christian tradition in having a more cyclical conception of time, as opposed to the Near Eastern idea of time as linear. Still, both of these views of sacred history contrast to Manakji's version of

²⁰*The Desatir or Sacred Writings of the Ancient Persian Prophets*, ed. Mulla Firuz bin Kaus, (Minneapolis: Wizard's Bookshelf, 1975). See also Erachji Sohrabji Meherjirana, *A Guide to the Zoroastrian Religion: A Nineteenth Century Catechism with Modern Commentary*, ed. and trans. Firoze M. Kotwal and

James W. Boyd (Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1982), 192. I am grateful to John Walbridge for this reference.

²¹Hamadani, *The New History*, 149.

²²*Bhagavad-Gita*, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Bantam, 1988), 50.

Zoroastrianism in accepting the possibility that aspects of divine legislation may be changed or abrogated over time.

Finally, he says, an Arabian Prophet came, who rejected all the previous revelations and insisted that the law he legislated be followed. Manakji is here referring to the Prophet Muhammad and to Islam, though he errs in suggesting that Muhammad did not accept previous prophets. This statement appears odd, but Manakji was probably referring to Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, both of which literalist Muslims tended to reject (though as we have seen, some Sufi masters accepted their general validity). It may also be that Manakji had talked to literal-minded Muslims who saw the current biblical text as corrupted by inaccurate copyists and unreliable, and that he is referring to this sort of rejection of its actual text. The Qur'an accepts the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels as divinely revealed, but a strong Muslim tradition grew up arguing that the originals of these books were no longer extant.

Manakji, then, sees three different paradigms for prophetic history in the world religions. In some traditions, prophets come serially but affirm a single unchanging Law. In some others, avatars or prophets come sequentially, and can abrogate the laws revealed by previous holy figures. Finally, some traditions wholly reject their predecessors and accept nothing from previous prophets. Manakji wants to know of which view of holy history Nuri approves.

Nuri in his reply draws on the theophanology, or ideas about the manifestations of God, that he had developed some twenty years earlier in the *Book of Certitude*. He points out that in Judaism, Moses brought divine legislation, but was succeeded by a large number of prophets who acted as vehicles for revelation without altering the Mosaic law. He therefore sees the situation Manakji describes for (*Dasatir*-influenced) Zoroastrianism as mirrored in Judaism. This schema of serial prophets with no alteration of the divine law, then, holds good for particular religious traditions, and is a special case within a larger tableau of progressive revelation. Major prophets like Moses

and Zoroaster legislate, and whereas minor successors like David do not. Major new prophets such as Jesus and Muhammad can arise to abrogate the past divine law and institute a new one.

Nuri goes on to challenge Manakji's third category, of the new legislating prophet (Muhammad) who altogether rejects his predecessors. Nuri maintains that the Arabian messenger of God never adopted the position attributed to him by the Parsi leader. He proves it by quoting Qur'an 3:1, "Alif. Lam. Mim. God! There is no god but He, the Living, the Merciful. In truth He sent down to thee 'the Book,' which confirms those which precede it. For He has sent down the Torah and the Evangel aforetime, as guidance to humankind; and now has He sent down the Salvation." Muhammad therefore affirmed the Pentateuch and the New Testament, and saw the Qur'an as a further installment in this series. That is, the Muslim idea of serial revelations with new religious laws being instituted from time to time by 'Prophets endowed with constancy' is not materially different from the Christian or the Hindu schemas, in his view.

Nuri therefore disallows the third case as based on a misunderstanding, and he folds the first case (of sequential non-legislating prophets) into the second. He succeeds in eliminating Manakji's three-fold distinction among religious traditions and incorporating them into a single, over-arching theory of progressive revelation.

The final question concerned which sort of messenger from the divine is superior among the three types. Nuri says that in some ways all messengers from God, whether legislating prophets or not, are equal as theophanies and bearers of revelation, and this is what the Qur'an means when it says, "We make no distinction between any of His Messengers" (2:285). On the other hand, clearly the legislating Manifestations in some ways enjoy precedence, and this is why the Qur'an also says, "And We preferred some of the Messengers over others" (2:253).

In his answer to Manakji's first question, Nuri does not directly address himself to the Hindu examples adduced. I think we must read this silence as assent. That is, Nuri's approach to other religious traditions was highly ecumenical, as is witnessed by his acceptance of the validity of Zoroaster and of the existing Bible, of neither of which most Iranian Shi'ites approved, and he seemed entirely willing to have examples from Hinduism constitute part of the discourse about the world religions. The *Yoga Vasistha*, with which Nuri was familiar, also briefly summarized the story of Krishna and Arjuna.²³ There is nothing in Manakji's paraphrase of the Bhagavad-Gita to which Nuri had any reason to object, given his own ideas. Manakji's characterization of the Hindu conception of the avatar consists in the bearer of revelation: 1) proclaiming his divinity, 2) insisting that all accept his authority, 3) coming when social discord and disaffection are prevalent, 4) declaring himself the return of his predecessor, and 5) instituting a new revealed law. The precise contours of Hindu theology are lost in this sort of summary, such that the ideas of Rama and Krishna as incarnations of Vishnu, and of reincarnation and karma, are not described in any detail.

What is reported sounds remarkably like Nuri's own prophetology as developed in the *Book of Certitude*. Nuri wrote, "Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: "I am God!" He verily speaketh the truth and no doubt attacheth thereto."²⁴ For Nuri, messengers from the divine are not merely prophets, but are theophanies, manifestations of the names and attributes of God in this world. Their theophanic status authorizes them to employ theopathic language (identifying themselves with God), though this discourse is in some sense metaphorical and does not imply an identity of essence between them and God. Seen in this way, Krishna's pronouncement that he is God would therefore be unexceptionable.

Baha'i scriptures say that manifestations of God are sent especially at times of social and spiritual unrest. The advent of the theophany is called a Day of

²³Venkatesananda, *The Concise Yoga Vasistha*, 315-316.

²⁴Husayn 'Ali Nuri, *The Kitab-i-Iqan: The*

Book of Certitude (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970), 178.

God, and is identified with eschatological symbols such as the darkening of the sun and the fall of the stars (which Nuri interprets figuratively). In the times leading up to the appearance of the Manifestation, Nuri says, “the break of the morn of divine guidance must needs follow the darkness of the night of error. For this reason, in all chronicles and traditions reference hath been made unto these things, namely that iniquity shall cover the surface of the earth and darkness shall envelop mankind.”²⁵ The idea that the deterioration of moral order precedes a new irruption of divine presence and grace, then, is held in common by the Bhagavad-Gita and the *Book of Certitude*.

Nuri rejected reincarnation, so on the face of it the idea of an avatar as the reincarnation of a preceding theophany would be an alien one. In fact, the Babi and Baha’i religions accept the idea of an eternal return that resembles the doctrine prevalent among ancient Stoics and Neo-platonists. Human beings are seen possess a soul (*nafs*) on the one hand, and on the other attributes (*sifat*). Although in Baha’i theology the soul upon death goes on to another plane of existence in the journey toward God, never returning to earth, its complex of personality-attributes can recur later in history. Nuri writes, in interpreting a verse of the Qur’an that identifies Muhammad with past prophets, “If you say that Muhammad was the ‘return’ of the Prophets of old, as is witnessed by this verse, his companions must likewise be the ‘return’ of the bygone companions, even as the ‘return’ of the former people is clearly attested by the text of the above-mentioned verses.”²⁶ Nuri, then, says that all the founders of the major religions possessed a unity on the plane of attributes. Each was a “return” of the others. He quotes esoteric Shi’ite sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, wherein he says, “I am all the Prophets,” and “I am the first Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus.”²⁷ Something very like the Hindu belief that each avatar is a return of his predecessors, then, also exists in Baha’ism, though the return is phenomenological (having to do with appearances) rather than ontological

²⁵Nuri, *The Kitab-i Iqan*, 32-33.

wyn: George Ronald Publisher, 1990), 30-32.

²⁶Nuri, *The Kitab-i Iqan*, 151; cf. Moojan Momen, *Hinduism and the Baha’i Faith* (Wel-

²⁷Nuri, *The Kitab-i Iqan*, 152-153.

(having to do with being). Finally, Nuri did acknowledge the authority of the major Manifestations of God, such as Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, to legislate new religious laws and to abrogate former ordinances.

This exercise of matching Nuri's teachings with those of Krishna as reported by Manakji can only be, of course, heuristic. Nuri's cautious silence has made it necessary to attempt to reconstruct the Baha'i-Hindu dialogue implied in this letter. The exercise is made all the more plausible when we consider Nuri's reference, elsewhere, to the Yoga Vasistha, with its implication that basic Hindu ideas were well enough known among the literate Iranians of the time so that they could be referred to with no further explanation. What can be said is that Nuri replied to Manakji's set of distinctions among Hinduism and other religious traditions by downplaying the differences and subsuming the various schemas of sacred history under his own conception of progressive revelation.

Manakji next asks a question about the relationship of God to the world, and outlines four positions. The first is metaphysical monism, which states that all visible beings are identical with the Absolute Truth. In India the Upanishads advocate this position, and it was systematized by the Hindu theologian Shankara Carya (b. 788 CE).²⁸ The second is metaphysical dualism, wherein God and the creation are recognized as different from one another, and prophets are seen as mediators between the divine and mundane realms. The prophetic religions of the Near East tended to adopt this position. There did also exist in India important theists who differentiated between creator and creation (such as Ramanuja [d. 1137 CE]), and even full-fledged dualists such as Madhva (1238-1317 CE), who made an absolute set of distinctions between the Lord (Ishvara) and the human soul.²⁹ The third position identifies God only with the celestial spheres, and not with the entirety of creation. The fourth is the deist position, that God created nature from eternity, and it thereafter regulates itself.³⁰

²⁸Klaus K. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 373-377.

²⁹Klostermaier, *Hinduism*, 377-383.

³⁰Hamadani, *The New History*, 151-152.

Nuri replies that of the four stances outlined, i.e. monism, metaphysical dualism, Neo-platonic panentheism, and deism, the second is “closer to piety”.³¹ The Arabic word *taqwa* has connotations of the “fear of God” as well as piety, and Nuri appears to mean by this phrase that metaphysical dualism, the assertion that the creation is other-than-God, best ensures that proper reverence for the ineffability of the Unknowable Essence is maintained. Nuri admits, however, that the other stances can also be maintained, not on the level of being or ontology, but on that of manifestation. That is, all things are manifestations of God’s names and attributes, and therefore it is possible to see God in all things. Nuri’s stance here resembles that of the Sufis who rejected existential monism, the unity of being between God and creatures, but agreed that great mystics can attain a state wherein a non-ontological unity of the divine and the phenomenal world is apparent to them (*wahdat al-shuhud*).³² Of course, it would have been equally possible for Nuri simply to say that the Shankara school of monism is incorrect as ontology, and he elsewhere says as much about Sufi pantheism. But his approach is to stress commonalities, to show the ways in which seemingly opposing theological positions can be reconciled. Thus, monism of the sort found in the Upanishads and Shankara’s writings is not treated as a propositional error, but is rather an accurate description of a valid mystical perception. Because the universe is itself theophanic, it is possible to see the manifestations of God in each created thing. Nevertheless, in Nuri’s view God’s necessary being continues to be sharply distinguished from the contingent being of created things.³³

Manakji’s next question is more practical. He notes that in Islam, a distinction exists between the law as a field of study (*fiqh*) and the sources (*usul*) of law (the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet, though most schools accepted

³¹Hamadani, *The New History*, 152.

³²The technical terms are *vahdat-i vujud*, the unity of Being, and *vahdat-i shuhud*, the unity of vision; for the point about Shankara cf. Momen, *Hinduism and the Baha’i Faith*, 3.

³³This argument derives from Avicenna’s distinction between God as necessarily existent

(*vajib-i vujud*) and the creatures as contingent (*imkani*). That is, God’s being is such that it cannot not exist, whereas the being of any creature is such that its existence depends on something else (God) and therefore it could conceivably not exist had God not chosen to endow it with being.

other sources, as well). In Islam the classical example for this sort of question is the prohibition on alcoholic beverages. The Qur'an itself only forbids wine, so the question arises of whether this narrow interdiction in the source text has any wider implications. According to the jurisprudence (*fiqh*) worked out by Muslim clergymen in the medieval period, a specific law can have wider application. For instance, the reason given in the revealed texts for the prohibition of wine is that it clouds the mind. By analogy, then, all substances that cloud the mind should also be forbidden, including, e.g., barley beer. Disagreements arose about the precise extent to which such analogies could be taken, and the Muslim science of the principles of jurisprudence is notorious for its openness to abuse or to idiosyncratic rulings by individual clergymen. The Shi'ite Akhbari school rejected the science of the principles of jurisprudence altogether, relying solely on a literalist understanding of the two main sources, the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet and the Imams. Manakji contrasts the tension in Islam between legal fundamentalism and judicial activism to the situation in Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, where he says that the textual sources have primacy. In the latter religions, he says, law is not conceived to exist apart from its scriptural sources.³⁴ Ironically, Manakji argues that Hinduism and Zoroastrianism are much more "fundamentalist" (in the modern western Protestant sense of scriptural positivist) than Islam, which rather has developed a sophisticated scholastic apparatus for legal interpretation.

Nuri takes a stance critical of the way the principles of jurisprudence had become a license in Shi'ite Islam for interpreters of the law, or *mujtahids*, to define the law in a high-handed way. He points out that in Islam an early proponent of the principles of jurisprudence was the Sunni, Abu Hanifah, and since Nuri was from a Shi'ite background this statement may be a way of questioning its validity. He goes on, however, to play down the difference between legal strict constructionists and believers in the principles of jurisprudence. He says that since the manifestation of God (himself) is alive

³⁴Hamadani, *The New History*, 154.

and can be asked about the meaning of the law, there was no need among Baha'is in the 1880s for a discipline such as the principles of jurisprudence.³⁵

The next question is related to the one about the interpretation of the law. Manakji says that some groups believe that divine law is only that which is congruent with what is natural and acceptable to the intellect. Others say that the divine Law--with all the irrationalities of ritual acts and so forth--must be accepted as it is, without the intervention of reason.³⁶

Nuri attempts to defuse the conflict set up by Manakji between intellect and revelation by insisting that revelation itself comes from the Neo-Platonic Universal Intellect. Since the intellects of individual humans are partial and limited, their task is not to oppose their understanding to that of the divine Law, but rather to seek to understand the universal rationality that lies behind it. Thus, some rituals are instituted simply to glorify God, having no practical utility, but they are nevertheless spiritual aids, and believers are recompensed for carrying them out. Nuri gives the example of how the Prophet Muhammad, when he first emigrated to Medina, received a revelation from God instructing him to pray toward the Kaaba in Mecca rather than, as before, praying toward Jerusalem. This change in ritual had the purpose, according to the Qur'an (2:138), of testing the early Muslims and dividing the obedient from those weak in faith.

The Baha'i amanuensis, Mirza Aqa Jan, adds here something that Nuri later dictated to him, which further illustrates the limited nature of individual human intellects. Nuri instructs the scribe to tell Mirza Abu'l-Fadl that "the ignorant among the Persians" have unfairly branded one of the manifestations of God (i.e. Zoroaster) as a fire-worshipper or sun-worshipper. Zoroaster himself, however, recognized that the sun was only a "turbid globe," and not a deity, and he said that nothing could exist except by virtue of God's Being. In the end, then, Nuri insists that limited human reason may not sweep away what is revealed by the Universal Intellect. In phrasing the question this

³⁵Hamadani, *The New History*, 155-156.

³⁶Hamadani, *The New History*, 157.

way, however, he avoids setting up a struggle between reason and revelation. Revelation is simply a very mature, perfect form of reason. This position is, of course, common among medieval Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroës, but was rejected by most clerics.³⁷

Manakji's next question puts Nuri in a very delicate situation. He says that some of the former Manifestations declared the meat of the cow ritually pure, whereas others forbade it. One allowed the meat of the pig, while others prohibited it. The meat of cows is forbidden in Hinduism, of course, whereas Judaism and Islam forbid pork.

In his Most *Holy Book*, Nuri had declared all things in the world ritually pure. This declaration was only one of the many ways in which he had abrogated Islamic law, which was the most controversial thing he did. That is, giving up the *shari'ah* or Muslim canon law was considered apostasy by the clergy, the punishment for which was death. Since Manakji had Shi'ite Muslims in his employ, who might gain access to this letter, Nuri declined openly to declare that such dietary restrictions had been abolished in the Baha'i religion. He does insist that nothing in the universe has been inscribed with the words, "this is prohibited." Rather, it is the Word of God that rendered things pure or impure, and these restrictions can change from one dispensation to the next. In other words, no religious law is eternally valid. Through his doctrine of progressive revelation, Nuri affirms that the dietary prohibitions of past religions were authoritative in their own dispensation, but had to give way to later, different, revealed systems of law.³⁸

Manakji says that Hinduism and Zoroastrianism are tolerant religions, the adherents of which associate in friendship with everyone. He contrasts them to other religions, which harass and persecute those they consider unbelievers. Which, he wants to know, is the way acceptable to God? In answer, Nuri firmly and unequivocally condemns persecution deriving from religious

³⁷Hamadani, *The New History*, 157-160.

³⁸Hamadani, *The New History*, 161-162.

intolerance. Religion must be, he says, a source of unity and concord, of compassion and empathy. Religious hatred is absolutely forbidden.³⁹

Manakji divides the religions into three groups according to their attitude toward conversion. He says that Zoroastrians and Hindus will not accept converts. Christians accept new believers into the fold, but do not insist that everyone convert. Muslims (and, he says, Jews [sic]) demand the conversion of others to their religion and if anyone declines they consider it lawful to usurp his wealth and family members. Manakji was clearly altogether ignorant of Judaism, which rather resembles Zoroastrianism and Hinduism in being slow to accept converts.

Hinduism itself differs in this regard according to sect. Brahminical Hinduism, it is true, does not accept the principle of conversion, or even the right of a Hindu to travel abroad over “black water.” On the other hand, bhakti or devotional sects are more open to converts, as are modern reform movements. His positioning of Christianity is historically suspect, since Christian intolerance at some times and places is well attested. As we shall see, Nuri also takes issue with his characterization of Christianity as practiced in history. Manakji’s description of Islam is inaccurate, but has a basis in medieval Muslim jurisprudence. As we have seen, Islam recognizes the right of protected minorities who believe in monotheism and a divinely revealed Book to maintain their religious beliefs under Muslim rule. Some Muslim clerics limited these protected minorities to the Jews and Christians, while others accepted Zoroastrians, as well. Of course, law or no law, some Muslim rulers persecuted Jews and Christians occasionally. In India, some accepted Hindus as a protected minority, but most clerics called for them to be given a choice between conversion and death. Since Hindus formed the vast majority of the Indian population, no Muslim ruler found this policy of forced conversion a feasible one in the long term.

Nuri expresses consternation at Manakji’s report “that the Hindus and Zoroastrians do not allow others to enter into their religions,” saying that

³⁹Hamadani, *The New History*, 162-164.

“this is contrary to the purpose of sending Messengers, and to what is in their Books.”⁴⁰ God dispatches envoys in order to guide His servants and organize their affairs. He further suggests that this exclusion of outsiders is the result of a late, in-grown insularity, and that the widespread ruins of Zoroastrian fire temples attest to the religion’s universal, missionary character in ancient times. He disputes Manakji’s characterization of Christianity as a religion that does not insist, and discusses the nineteenth-century Christian missionary enterprise as a concerted effort to induct young children of other cultures into the church. Nuri says that the proper attitude is for believers to offer their religion to their friends as a free and generous gift. Should the friends not accept it, they must avoid at all cost allowing any feelings of hatred or dislike to develop.⁴¹ Again, Nuri attempts to undermine the distinctions Manakji makes among the world religions. He suggests that ancient Zoroastrianism was once open to converts, and denies that it was ever ethically permitted in any religion (therefore including Islam) to impose forced conversions. He is also not convinced of the absolute difference between Christianity and Islam as missionary religions. His vision is of a liberal society wherein competing religious discourses are allowed to co-exist, with the most persuasive gaining the converts.

Manakji’s next question is about religious pluralism versus religious exclusivism. Zoroastrians, he says, believe their religion is best, but will admit that other religions are valid (*haqq*). By analogy, they say that a prime minister is the best source for information about the king, but that other, lower palace officials do possess some information of that sort, as well. Thus, Zoroaster is the divine prime minister, whereas the other prophets and holy figures in the world religions are mere chamberlains and sergeants-at-arms. Still, all are denizens of the celestial palace and valid reporters of its affairs. In contrast, he says that Hindus believe no meat-eater can enter heaven, and he reports that the religions of Muhammad, Jesus, and Moses maintain that whoever does not accept their truth cannot attain paradise.

⁴⁰Hamadani, *The New History*, 162-164.

⁴¹Hamadani, *The New History*, 164-66.

In understanding Manakji's distinctions, it may be useful to refer to a contemporary analyst of the world religions. John Hick has characterized the view that all religions are equally valid as pluralism. The view that one's own religion has all the truth, but the others possess some part of it, he calls inclusivism. He terms "exclusivism" the idea that only one's own religion is true and salvific, whereas the others are false.⁴² Manakji characterizes Zoroastrianism as inclusivist, but says Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are exclusivist.⁴³ He later admits, however, that Hindus and Zoroastrians believe themselves created from Brahma and the First Intellect, respectively, and that they are therefore different from and better than other humans, who have grosser origins.⁴⁴

Nuri replies that when Zoroaster said his religion was more sublime than all others, he was referring to the prophets who came before him. Nuri refers Manakji to the *Book of Certitude*, wherein he had explained that all the manifestations of God in one sense enjoy the same station, but in another are differentiated. In the Baha'i schema of progressive revelation, the most recent Manifestation of God, by virtue of his historical position, brings a more complete message; however, this does not render it spiritually or ontologically superior to the others. Nuri simply arrives at a different, more mature world-historical moment. His stance is therefore one of pluralism at the level of the theophany, and inclusivism at the level of serial time.

Nuri says, "He wrote that the Hindus say that whosoever eats meat shall never glimpse paradise. But this saying contradicts his earlier assertion that they believe all religions to be true. For if their truth has been established, then no grounds exist upon which their adherents can be denied entry into heaven."⁴⁵ Nuri here identified a real tension within Hinduism, between the tolerance and universalism of the high philosophers in the Vedanta tradition, and the narrow ritualism and casteism of the petty pandits. The contrast is between Mahatma Gandhi and the Brahmins who excommunicated him for crossing the "black waters" to England.

⁴²John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 91.

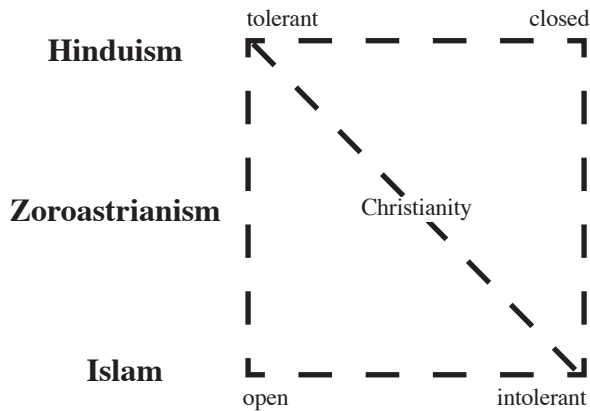
⁴⁴Hamadani, *The New History*, 168-170.

⁴⁵Hamadani, *The New History*, 168-170.

⁴³Hamadani, *The New History*, 166-167.

Nuri finds the contrast especially stark because in his own religion entry into paradise is identical with attaining the good-pleasure of God, even in this world. Heaven is a never-ending path toward God, a processual state, rather than a physical place. He concludes, “Every one of the Prophets has come from the Absolute Truth”.⁴⁶ Nuri also insists that all humans have been created by the will of God, and none may claim a special origin. Moreover, he demythologizes stories such as an origin in the creator-god Brahma or in the First Intellect, saying that no one knows anything about the origins of the universe. He believes the universe, in fact, to be eternal with regard to time. Temporally, it has always existed. The cosmos is, however, originated in the sense that it is caused by God; it has *always* been being caused by God, however. He favors this Neoplatonic cosmology, with its universalist overtones, over the particularistic and almost tribal origin-myths quoted by Manakji.⁴⁷

Figure 1: Manakji’s View of the World Religions as Semiotic Square



The interchange between Manakji and Nuri involves a tension between analysis and synthesis. Manakji proceeds by identifying a set of related phenomena, the world-religions of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, and then dividing them into different categories according to

⁴⁶Hamadani, *The New History*, 167-168.

⁴⁷Hamadani, *The New History*, 168-170.

their theological and social positions. Zoroastrianism and Hinduism are thus theologically and socially tolerant, but are closed to conversion. In contrast, he depicts Islam as not only open to conversion, but as aggressively insistent on it, and as being theologically and socially intolerant. Christianity serves as a mediating influence between these oppositions. It is tolerant like Hinduism but open to conversion like Islam (Figure 1). Nuri positions Baha'ism as the mediating term, as more tolerant than Christianity and just as open, though he also insists that all the religions ought ideally to have had these characteristics.

Nuri's rhetorical stance is one of peace-maker and ecumenist rather than that of analyst. He is concerned to show that the distinctions among the world religions made by Manakji are over-drawn, to demonstrate that a unity underlies them. His answer to Manakji's first question set the tone, which did not vary thereafter. Whereas the Parsi agent saw conceptions of sacred history to differ radically among Zoroastrians, Hindus and Christians, and Muslims, Nuri subsumes all these schemas under his framework of universal progressive revelation. He accepts Manakji's characterization of Hinduism and Christianity as believing in successive holy figures, some of whom have the authority to bring a new religious law. He points out that in fact, the Islamic view of sacred history is similar. And he sees the particularism of Judaism and the esoteric Zoroastrianism of the *Disatir*, which have clung to a single law despite the advent of several prophets, as a feature of single religions that can be incorporated into a larger pattern of universal sacred history. In the other questions, as well, about tolerance and intolerance, conversion, and inclusivism versus exclusivism, Nuri strives to show the unity of the world religions. In many instances, the differences between him and Manakji have to do with his concentration on the ideal, and the Indian's on the actual behavior of religionists. Thus, Nuri believes Zoroastrianism was and should have been a universalistic missionary religion, despite the nineteenth-century Zoroastrian practice of refusing converts admittance. In this historical point, he is correct, since in ancient times there certainly were converts to Zoroastrianism (e.g.

among the Armenians). He suggests that Hindu pantheism should be seen as an attempt to understand the theophanic nature of the cosmos, ignoring the grounding of the Shankara school in a monist ontology. Wherever possible, Nuri seeks to establish common ground, to point out similarities, and to demolish Manakji's lattice-work of fine distinctions.

At the beginning of this chapter I appealed to Wittgenstein's notion of language games as a way of understanding Nuri's approach to the differing theologies of the world religions. After having discussed the issue of the God-world relationship, Nuri says, "today a new cause has appeared and a new discourse is appropriate."⁴⁸ He appears to be saying that each past religious tradition developed a specific discourse, which was internally valid as a system of thought and feeling, and which successfully characterized some aspects of the divine and its relationship to the world. The appearance of a new prophet or manifestation of God, however, initiates a new discourse, which should then be preferred because of its greater appropriateness to the age in which it develops. The theology of the new manifestation forms a "grammar", a set of rules governing speech about the divine for believers.⁴⁹ As Wittgenstein wrote, "new language-games . . . come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten."⁵⁰ One challenge for those who use the idea of "language-games" to understand the theologies of the world religions lies in avoiding the impression that one is attempting to detach the religions from any real referent or to protect them from reasoned inquiry into their validity.⁵¹ Although Wittgenstein did argue for methods rather than method in philosophy, and Wittgensteinian analysis should therefore be open to diverse religious language-games, this openness does not imply a lack of discrimination or of falsifiability. Susan Brill points out that "the organicism of Wittgenstein's methodology militates against a pluralist view that would

⁴⁸*Al-yawm amr-i digar zahir va guftigu-yi digar layiq.*

⁴⁹See D. Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

⁵⁰Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investi-*

gations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (3rd ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1994), Part I, para. 23.

⁵¹See Patrick Sherry, *Religion, Truth and Language-Games* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

assume the viability and validity of all theoretical approaches. Such a pluralist orientation ignores the fact that each theoretical discourse is limited by its own boundaries which, in many cases, are sufficient determinants of the theory's efficaciousness, or lack thereof."⁵² That is, there are standards and boundaries by which one can assess the validity of a religious discourse. Nuri did not think all religions are true, though he was willing to acknowledge the time-bound validity of a set of particular religious discourses.

Each religion involves a language-game with its own vocabulary and grammar, which is an individual form of life shaped both by the attempt to describe the numinous and by cultural and historical context. Nuri held that God is characterized by a different sort of being than mundane human reality in this world. The sublimity of the referent of religious language allows it to be validly described in more than one manner, as in Rumi's parable about the blind men and the elephant. Wittgenstein was interested in the finding of Gestalt psychology that certain drawings, such as a contoured goblet, can also be configured by the eye as two faces staring at one another, while others can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit. He was also struck by the relational nature of such aspects; how we see things depends on what we take as background and what as foreground.⁵³

Nuri held that the referents of religious language are textured, subtle and ambiguous. The relativism of the Baha'i system is not absolute, since Nuri excludes some language-games as invalid, and insists on the greater validity of the most recent theological language game, which forms a touchstone for previous religious forms of life. Nuri believes this primacy of the recent derives, not from the intrinsic superiority of the latest message, but simply from its world-historical position; for this reason, unity and equality among the religions is not incompatible with progressive revelation.

⁵²Susan B. Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory: Beyond Postmodernism and Toward Descriptive Investigations* (Athens, Oh.: Ohio University Press, 1995), 24.

⁵³Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 212e; Brill, *Wittgenstein*, 46-47.