

# BAHA'I AND GLOBALISATION

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## CHAPTER 2

### Globalization and the *Hidden Words*

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#### **From Tehran to Baghdad**

Baghdad (traditionally known as 'the City of Peace') is, we have all recently come to learn, a very diverse place both ethnically and religiously.<sup>1</sup> As such, it may be thought a faithful emblem of islamicate culture and history.<sup>2</sup> There are Sunni Muslims, Shi'i Muslims, Sunni Kurds, Syriac Christians, and Jews, among others. Moreover, it has been this way for a very long time indeed. Seventeenth century travelers 'were impressed with the great admixture of race, the diversity of speech and the rare freedom enjoyed by non-Muslims and the great toleration among the masses' (Durri 1975: 934b). Contrasted with the capital of its Eastern neighbor Iran, Baghdad was infinitely more cosmopolitan than the mainly Shi'i population of Tehran. Tehran, monochrome by comparison, had been mainly Shi'i for several hundred years as well. The significance this fact might have for the growth and development of the Bahai Faith is the main question treated here. The proposition is that the relatively communalistic and parochial Shi'i Babi movement

- 1 Note the prolonged difficulty the recently American-appointed Iraqi ruling council had in choosing a leader from amongst twenty-five members, finally settling on the Shi'i Ja'fari as the first president. Note also that this office is meant to rotate on a monthly (!) basis in alphabetical order. <http://www.salon.com/news/wire/2003/07/30/Interim/>
- 2 The term 'islamicate' may require some explanation. It was coined by the historian Marshal G.S. Hodgson (1974, 1: 57-60) who thereby sought to avoid doctrinal and normative complications by the use of 'Islamic' in such contexts.

was transformed as changes in audience occurred. If the Bahai prophet-founder Baha' u'llah had not been exiled to Iraq, and then Turkey and finally Ottoman Palestine (modern day Israel), it is possible that his writings would have remained more identifiably Shi'i than they did. In Baghdad, faced with an audience of widely divergent background and composition, Baha' u'llah was also faced with the task of distilling the vast complex of arcana and esoterica that was the revelation of the Bab into an essence that could move a much broader spectrum of believer than the virtually all-Shi'i audience of the Bab. In the process, his message was being universalized for an even wider audience than 19th century Baghdad. In order to demonstrate this proposition, we will analyze the opening passages of Baha' u'llah's *Hidden Words* with this factor of audience in mind.

### The Sacralization of Globalization

How does such a discussion find its way into a book of essays devoted to the problem of the Bahai Faith and Globalization? To begin with, the doctrinal content of the Bahai Faith is nothing if not universal. One assumes that there is some kind of important connection between the 'universal' and the 'global'. Traditionally, a 'universal' truth or feature is thought to be one that migrates across long-standing boundaries or barriers of ethnos, nationality, language, culture, and geography to speak of something inherently, irreducibly and 'universally' human. To speak of a universal idea is to speak of one that is eminently susceptible of globalization — of being relevant or pertinent or even merely registrable, to human beings wherever they might be on planet Earth.<sup>3</sup>

Here, a unique phenomenon that has occurred in the growth and development of the Bahai Faith will be examined, namely the process

3 I should like to thank Professor Margit Warburg for her very helpful suggestions and comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I would also like to thank the editorial team, Dr Morten Warmind and Dr Annika Hvithamar, for their guidance and patience. Professors Peter Beyer of the University of Ottawa and Barbara Lawson, Ethnology Curator, Redpath Museum, McGill University, also read earlier drafts and made several very helpful suggestions touching both content and style, for which I am most grateful. Obviously, none of these kind readers is responsible for the remaining flaws.

by which a relatively marginal Islamic sect became a global 'World Religion' and in the process lost much of its original Islamic identity. No other similar movement of the last two hundred years has so completely left the 'gravitational pull' of Islam, to forge such a singular identity. This growth and development is no better characterized anywhere than in the words of Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (d. 1957) when he spoke of this process as the transformation of a 'heterodox and seemingly negligible offshoot of the Shaykhi school of the Ithna-Ashariya sect of Shi'a Islam into a world religion' (Rabbani 1970: xii).

Briefly, this statement refers to an intellectual history little studied in connection with the history of the Bahai Faith, but nonetheless necessary to understand it in its time and place. This is a history in which the Shi'i mystico-philosophical movement begun by Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i (d. 1826) plays a crucial and essential role. It was the activities and beliefs of this movement that would lead ultimately to the dramatic events associated with the chiliastic-cum-revolutionary activities of Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi (b. 1819). This young charismatic and messianic prophet, known to history as the Bab (Arabic for *Gate*), was executed by Iranian state and religious authorities in 1850. Afterwards, many of his followers one of whom was Mirza Husayn Ali Mazandarani, *Baha' u'llah* (Arabic for *Glory of God*; d. 1892) would be dispersed throughout the Middle East. What the above quotation refers to is the move away from the extremely arcane, esoteric and highly exclusivist worldview of that Shi'i movement (Amanat 1989: 188-207) into a world religion with universal and global appeal (Smith 1987: 31-45 & 136-156). Some have characterized this trajectory as a move from heterodoxy to orthodoxy (MacEoin 1990: 329). While it may be reasonably argued and debated amongst scholars whether the Bahai Faith actually qualifies as a World Religion (Fazel 1994) rather than, say, a New Religious Movement or, 'NRM' (Internet discussion 1997), it is not debatable that there are now Bahai communities all over the world in regions and localities as culturally different as they could possibly be. So, whether as a *bona fide* World Religion or 'merely' an NRM (it may be more accurate in this instance to speak of New Religious Identities), the Bahai Faith is a global phenomenon in the process of constructing a global identity with the aid of universal teachings that apply to the human condition (Beyer 1998: Ch. 6; McMullen 2000: *passim*, esp. 109-125).

Of interest here is the stark contrast that its early, extremely paro-

chial and exclusivist origins in the Shaykhi movement and the Babi faith provide to its current profile as promoter of the oneness of mankind, unity in diversity, tolerance, the abolition of prejudices and the honoring and valuing of the differences amongst the human family. A more compelling interest is precisely the manner in which this transformation occurred, what were its stages and how do we measure the process? (Smith 1987: 2-3).

Baha'u'llah, — who may be seen as a 19th century Persian theorist of modernism and globalization (Cole 1998: 14-15 & 32-47) — formulated his teachings in the mid to later 19th century, a crucial period in the rise of globalization. So, 'Bahai' has grown concomitantly with globalization, and there is reason to believe that there exists a close connection between the Bahai Faith and globalization from a historical as well as a sociological perspective. This connection can be elucidated by using material that comes from members of the Bahai community today (e.g., van den Hoonaard 1996, McMullen 2000). But it may be that the relationship between Bahai and globalization can also be studied and appreciated by working with religious texts. Here, another perspective may be illuminating, namely, the influence that the philosophical mysticism of Islam has had on the 'globalistic' doctrinal content of the Bahai Faith.

It is assumed that one of the chief factors facilitating the globalization of the Bahai Faith has been the relatively high degree to which people around the world have recognized themselves — their questions, problems, hopes, fears, sufferings and joys — as being addressed directly and in compelling ways by the Bahai teachings. This coupled with a dissatisfaction with their 'native' religions, has caused many to see in Bahai a fresh statement of what is most essential to religion as such. One of the best loved and most widely distributed and translated small compendia of Bahai teachings is a collection of Arabic and Persian apothegms known as *The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah*. Quite apart from their literary beauty, a look at the circumstances of composition and the doctrinal contents of Baha'u'llah's *Hidden Words* will, it is hoped, offer us an insight into the transformation we are concerned with here. But before turning directly to this text, a bit of background is required.

### Enchanted Ontology

One of the more prominent features of later Islamic spirituality and mysticism is the degree to which it is concerned with ontology, the nature of Being and/or Existence. Taking as a starting point traditional hylomorphism, Muslim sages and mystics would evolve a theory known as the Unity of Being, a kind of pantheism or panentheism which resulted in the divine unity of God being reflected and refracted, if not consubstantiated, in the resplendent multiplicity of creation. This basic apperception or spiritual axiom would be configured and articulated in a variety of ways. But the main idea, that creation was a mysterious expression of divine unity — that between and amongst all created things (including human beings) there was a living and sacred connection — would never be challenged. This basic and profoundly mystical or Sufi orientation represents the manner in which the world of Islamic mystical philosophy remains, to borrow a current term, enchanted. It is also the source and background of the teachings of Baha'u'llah (Cf. Rabbani 1973: 226).

Of course, the mystics and philosophers, being also rationalists, sought authoritative, logical explanations for this enchanted ontology, what they called 'unity in diversity' (*vahdat dar kasrat/vahdat fi 'l-kathrat*), a frequent Bahai watchword (Baha'i International Community 1997: 9; cf. Amuli 1989: 310) According to Islamic tradition, the Prophet himself was given the answer to this abstruse question by God himself. The answer has become one of the most important foci of meditation for Islamic spirituality and is preserved in the literary form known as *Hadith Qudsi*, extra-Quranic 'Sacred Saying of God', Who informed the Prophet:

I was a Hidden Treasure and yearned to be known  
So, I created mankind (lit. 'creation').<sup>4</sup>

Thus the answer to the metaphysical question 'Why is there something

4 Arabic: *kuntu khamzan maktufyan 'ahbabtu 'an 'urafu fakhalqtu al-khalqa* (Amuli 1989: 102, 159, 162, 164, 601, 639, 662, 665, 682). Note: in this and the other transliterations to follow, 'ayn is represented by a simple apostrophe, nor is it possible to show velars and other similar sounds with the use of under dots.

rather than nothing – why are we here?’ is linked to God’s desire (lit. ‘love’) to be known. As a result, knowledge and love are indissolubly bound in a syzygical noetic and experiential dynamic that points to Being or Beyond.<sup>5</sup> It should also be mentioned that a standard hadith is composed of two equally important parts, its ‘text’ (*matn*, i.e. the part quoted above) and its credential or pedigree, known in Arabic by the word *isnad*, literally ‘chain [of authority]’, a long list of the names of teachers – ‘spiritual ancestors’ – who passed the knowledge from one to another. In Islamic learned discourse, one reveals (or conceals) one’s deepest religious allegiances according to the composition of *isnads* one uses for textual support. In the case of the kind of hadith represented here, namely *hadith qudsi*, there is an *isnad*, but these are frequently left out in published collections perhaps indicating that the important aspect is God’s speaking directly to Muhammad, presumably through Gabriel, the angel of revelation, or in a dream (Robson 1971: 28-29). Thus, such statements are frequently unencumbered by the kind of sectarian sub-text afflicting other hadith. This type of hadith found favour amongst an earlier group of Islamic ‘universalists’, namely the Sufis. This particular hadith happens to be a favorite and may be seen as providing the foundational scriptural basis for the doctrine of the Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*) associated with the greatest mystic of them all, Ibn Arabi (d.1240) and embraced by the many generations of his followers (and critics) who populate the world of Islam. Amongst such followers there are both Sunnis and Shi’is; in time, these followers would be criticized harshly for their ‘pantheistic’ beliefs. One of these opposing tendencies is referred to as Unity of Seeing (*wahdat al-shuhud*). Apparently at stake in the controversy is the transcendence of God.<sup>6</sup> The ‘*wujudis*’ were seen by some of their critics to violate this in their teachings. At times the debate would become quite intense. One example of such a heated controversy may be found

5 Note the Baha’i noonday prayer, ‘I testify O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.’ (*ashhadu ya ilahi bi-annaka khalaqtani li-irfanika wa-’ibadatika*). Here ‘worship’ may be considered a near synonym for love. (Baha’u’llah 1982: 21; English translation by Shoghi Effendi in *Bahá’í Prayers* 1982: 4).

6 For a deeper reading of the terms of the debate, see Landolt 1971. Here, incidentally, it is pointed out that the term *wahdat al-wujud*, does not appear in any of Ibn Arabi’s known writings.

in a work by the above-mentioned Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i himself. Here, Shaykh Ahmad takes to task, in virulent terms, one of the pillars of later Twelver Shi’ism, Mulla Muhsin Fayz Kashani (d. 1680) and virtually accuses him of unbelief (the most serious of crimes) for the doctrines he propagates. As a spokesman against the Unity of Being ‘school’, Shaykh Ahmad sought to elevate the Godhead beyond such terrestrial notions as ‘being’ and ‘existence’.<sup>7</sup> This theological position was a key feature in the mysticism of the Bab and continues to be a part of basic Bahai belief (Lawson 2001). However, attachment and assent to the actual *hadith qudsi* was not restricted to so-called *wujudis*, for the *shuhudis* could easily find in it support for their opposing doctrine. Shaykh Ahmad himself comments on it and ‘Abdu’l-Baha wrote an important, extensive commentary on it (Momen 1985). And, indeed, one of the Bahai obligatory prayers may be seen to reflect it almost verbatim (see above, note 5).

The *Hidden Words* were composed in Baghdad during the year 1857 (Taherzadeh 1980: 71-83). At that time, what we now call Iraq was governed by the Sururi Ottomans, although there was a very large, if not majoritarian, Shi’i element there. Not quite 25 years had passed since the violent communal riots in the Shi’i shrine city of Karbala (during which the second leader of the Shaykhi community, Sayyid Kazem Rashti, d.1844, had played an instrumental peacekeeping role). The Ottoman government eventually intervened. Thousands were killed and Iran was nearly forced to declare war against the Turkish authority (Cole and Momen 1986). The proposition put forth here is that ‘Bahai universalism’ would get its earliest impetus in works like the *Hidden Words* inasmuch as they were addressed to a previously unknown – i.e., in the case of Babism – heterogeneous (and potentially explosive) audience composed of Sunnis and Shi’is.<sup>8</sup> At the time of the revelation of the *Hidden Words*, Baha’u’llah’s audience would have been divided into at least four major more or less mutually exclusive

7 There is no space here to discuss this in detail. The interested reader is referred to Lawson, 2005.

8 This is not to suggest that religious and confessional tensions did not exist in Iran. Note above the reference to the controversy surrounding *wahdat al-wujud*. This is only one example; see below the reference to Akhbaris and Usulis. And there are many other lines of fracture. It is true, however, that the Baghdad context was exponentially more ‘multicultural’.

groups: the Sunnis, the Shi'is, the Wujudis and the Shuhudis. In turn, each of these groups, like the Shi'is, would be further divided into opposing factions, such as Akhbaris, the Usulis and the Shaykhis. This does not begin to take into account the stratified social variegation of 19th century Baghdad (Batatu 1978). Addressing such an audience, Baha'u'llah reduced the spiritual teachings of his religion to their most essential elements and thereby avoided placing unnecessary obstacles in the path of seekers of truth in the form of communalistic cues and insignia so common to much of Islamic religious literature of the time.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, he himself says so in the opening brief prologue to the *Hidden Words* (to which we will return).

What follows, is simply a demonstration of some of the ways in which the *Hidden Words* recasts traditional and contemporary Islamic teachings in a form innocent of any discernable communalistic provenance or allegiance, whether Shi'i, Sunni or organized Sufism. What emerges is a kind of catholic islamicate breviary, destined to appeal to a literary taste that had been cultivated in an islamicate milieu over the centuries and whose key reference points and inspirations, from the perspective of literary history, are the Qur'an, the Hadith and distinctive Sufi religio-literary presuppositions. But it is also a taste that is certainly not exclusively Muslim, let alone Shi'i. Obviously, it will not be possible to analyze the entire contents of this work. Only a few key examples have been chosen.

### The Hidden Words

In the *Hidden Words*, no group or faction is preferred over another. Certainly, Baha'u'llah would have been known as a 'Babi'; but the vast majority of Baghdadis (along with a vast majority of Babis themselves) did not necessarily know what this meant as far as doctrinal detail might be concerned, apart from the general messianic mood of the movement. One indication of this mood is in the original title of the work at hand: *The Hidden Book of Fatima*. This explicitly points

9 As just one example from among literally thousands, the work mentioned above by the great scholar Mulla Muhsin Fayz Kashani, may be distinguished from Baha'u'llah's composition of the same name, in part, by the constant references to the authority of 'Ali and the Imams. See Lawson 2002.

to the fulfillment of the Shi'i Islamic eschaton which was to see, among other things, a number of books that had heretofore been hidden with the occulted and awaited Imam, and were expected to be published with his emergence from hiding (*zuhur*) (Lawson 2002, Amir-Moezzi 1992). The title was changed to its current status at some point, but we do not know exactly when (Taherzadeh 1980: 71). The change of title really underlines the overall achievement of the *Hidden Words*.

In the text at hand, brief quotations functioning almost like musical notes and phrases, are taken from the Qur'an, and Hadith, and heard throughout in an improvised form (Lawson 1997: 197-98; cf. also Lewis 1998). While the composition may be full of traditional Sufi terminology, there is no assumed allegiance to any of the many existing Sufi organizations. There can be no question of plagiarism here. The reader or hearer would instantly recognize these various cues and would deem it jarring if not insulting for the author to have disrupted the flow of the 'heavenly' discourse/performance to cite a 'source'. And, what is absent is just as important as what is there: nowhere in the book is there any mention of a proper name (not even Muhammad's) that could signal an allegiance to either Sunni, Shi'i or Sufi Islam. There are no *isnads*.<sup>10</sup> There are no legalistic doctrines or cultic pronouncements that could also be communalistically identified. What remains then is something that could easily appear to the mid-19th century Baghdadi, whether Sunni, Shi'i or Sufi, Christian or Jew as 'pure Religion'. A religion apparently unencumbered by the tragedy of history, appearing as a restatement of basic truths through the medium of a compelling religious literary art in both languages of the city: Arabic (71 'verses' and Persian (82 'verses').

Let us now turn to the text itself in order to illustrate this complex and seamless process. We will begin with the above-mentioned prologue to the *Hidden Words*:

He is the Glory of Glories

This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have

10 See the similar phenomenon in the writings of the Bab, specifically his first explicitly proclamatory book, the *Qayyum al-asma* (Lawson 1988b/1990).

taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfil in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue.<sup>11</sup>

With this statement, which is completely free of Shi'i-specific references or cues, the message of oneness, unity, social harmony, social justice and peace may be seen as not merely emerging directly but literally escaping from the caldron of religious animosity exacerbated by the Safavid moment in history and continued to some degree by the 19th century socio-political reality of the Middle East. What is more, Baha'u'llah addresses his audience with a somewhat unusual but quite telling designation. In the English text, the word 'righteous' translates the Arabic word *ahbār*, a Quranic term meaning 'priests' but which likely means here in the first instance 'learned ones'. Such 'learned ones' are not identifiable as Muslims of any particular stripe. Indeed, the dictionary definition of the word is explicit: 'non-Muslim religious leaders'. If Baha'u'llah had wanted to designate Muslims specifically here, he could have chosen from a whole lexicon of alternate terms: 'learned Muslim religious scholars' (*ulema*), 'gnostic Muslims' (*urafa*), 'mystic philosophers' (*hukama*), not to mention the standard 'Muslims' (*muslimun*) or 'Believers [in Islam]' (*mu'minun*). Any of these other terms, including perhaps the most inclusive (but simultaneously exclusive) Quranic designation, 'people of the Book' (*ahl al-kitab*), used here would have lent an entirely different elan to this prologue.<sup>12</sup> With such a form of address, Baha'u'llah seeks to circumvent the exceedingly vexed problem of a 'correct' Islam as such, and attempts to create a new audience.<sup>13</sup> The mood is the time-

11 *Hidden Words*-English: 4-5; Arabic: *huwa 'l-bahá'u l-abhá hádhá má nuzzila min jabarúti 'l-'izzati bilisáni 'l-qudrati wa'l-quwwati 'alá al-nabyyín min qablu wa'inná 'akhadhmá jawáhirahu wa'qmasnáhu qamtsá 'l-ikhstísár fadlan 'alá 'l-ahbár liyáfi bi'ahdi 'lláhi wa yu'addú 'amánátihí fi 'anfusihim walíyakúnunna bijawhari 'l-tuqá fi 'ardi 'rrúh mina 'l-fí'izáa* (*Hidden Words*-Arabic: 3)

12 Note 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remark that long-standing Qur'anic notion of 'people of the Book' has been expunged from Bahá'í teachings (*Bahá'í World Faith* 1956: 246).

13 There are Shi'i hadiths identifying the Imams as *ahbār* (Isfahání 1954: 125). It is unlikely, but of course possible, that the word carries this meaning here.

less, perennial truth of prophecy. But no prophets are named, only God, as in 'covenant of God' (*'ahd allah*). *Allah* is the word for God in Arabic and is used by Arabs, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim or members of any other group, to indicate the highest cosmic power. Although the word is habitually associated with Islam, there is nothing inherently Islamic about it (Gardet 1975). The *Hidden Words* have 'descended'. This translates the standard Arabic word for 'having been revealed', *nuzzila*. The descent, or revelation is from 'the realm of glory' (*jabarut al-'izza*) an appropriately abstract religio-philosophical technical term. 'Uttered by the tongue of power and might' (*bilisan al-qudra wa'l-quwwa*) namely, an anonymous angel of revelation (perhaps the tenth intellect of Muslim neo-platonists, or the faculty of the 'heart' of the Sufis, or any number of other 'islamicate' possibilities). Finally, it is the same message that was revealed unto the 'Prophets of old' (*al-nabíyyin min qablu*). Now, Islamic prophethood recognizes 124,000 prophets prior to Muhammad, so we are not even restricted here to thinking of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. The sweep is magisterial. The audience could not be more vast.

The next two passages are equally 'anonymous' moral and ethical exhortations. The vocabulary is evocative of Sufism and its moral ethical and spiritual culture (Schimmel 1975: 228-241):

O Son of Spirit

My first counsel is this: Possess a pure kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting.<sup>14</sup>

O Son of Spirit

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behoveth thee to be. Verily justice

For a recent study of the relationship among scripture, reader/audience, and exegesis, based on recent insights of literary criticism, see McAuliffe 2000.

14 *Hidden Words*-English: 1:5. Arabic: *yá 'bna r-rúli fi 'awwali 'l-qawli 'mlík qalbá jayyidan hasanan muntrán litamlika mulká dá'imán báqíyan 'azalan qadímán* (*Hidden Words*-Arabic: 1: 4).

is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the standard themes of ethical monotheism so beautifully expressed here, there are one or two clues to the mystic-philosophical tradition discussed above and out of which the Bahai Faith was born. But these are not explicitly identified with Shi'ism, or mysticism or philosophy. The reference to 'Justice' comes close to alluding to Shi'ism, and no doubt did so for a Shi'i audience. It is one of the prime religious preoccupations of that tradition, a tradition molded in marginalization and persecution. One of the hallmarks of the return of the Hidden Imam would be that he 'fill the earth with Justice as it is now filled with injustice.' (Amuli 1989: 102. Note that here the 15<sup>th</sup> century author connects this with the hadith 'I was a hidden treasure' discussed above.) But even here, Baha'u'llah makes a very deft adjustment. In Arabic, there are two closely related words to express the idea of justice. The one found most frequently in messianic texts of Shi'ism is *'adl*. The word used here is *insaf* and denotes fairness or equity more than justice. Thus, with a single word Baha'u'llah not only orients the discourse away from explicit and exclusive messianic Shi'ism, but also beyond the realm of Islamic law, whether Sunni or Shi'i. *Insaf* as equity implies a kind of Golden Rule in which it is necessary first to be equitable to oneself and then to others (Arkoun 1971: 1237). Certainly, the word can mean 'justice' but this concept, in an Islamic milieu is more accurately represented by the word *'adl*.

The topic of knowledge is also broached in this passage. The Arabic word *ma'rifa* refers to a specific kind of knowledge, namely spiritual or mystical, as distinct from the word *'ilm* which by comparison means religious, sacerdotal or legalistic knowledge. The exhortation is to 'know of thine own knowledge' (*ta'rif bima'rifatika*). This is quite a remarkable statement in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Shi'ism when the powerful office of the Marja' Taqlid – the so-called 'Shi'i pope' – was in the process of

15 *Hidden Words-English* 2: 6; Arabic: *yá 'bna 'r-rúh 'ahabbu al-ashyá 'indi al-únsáfu. Lá tarǧhab 'anhu in takun ilaya ráǧhibá wa lá taghífal mintu litakuna lí 'anímán wa 'anta tuwaffáqu bi dháliká 'an tusháhida al- 'ashyá bi 'aynika lá bi 'ayni l- 'ibáádi wata'rifánu bima'rifatika lá bima'rifati 'ahad fi 'l-bilád. fakkir fi dháliká kayfa yanbaghá 'an takúna. dháliká min 'atíyyati 'alayka wa 'ináyati laka já' allu 'inánna 'aynayka. (Hidden Words-Arabic: 2: 4).*

being consolidated and institutionalized (Kazemi-Moussavi 1996). But, it is a direct continuation of the kind of anti-clericalism taught by Shaykh Ahmad (Cole 2001: 88ff) that would characterize much of the Bahai message and, no doubt, redound to its appeal. As such it may be seen as something of an improvisation on an equally iconic *hadith qudsi*:

He who has known himself has known his Lord.<sup>16</sup>

This is another one of a number of core 'verbal icons' whose contemplation enlivens and gives shape to Islamic mysticism. Note that the same words in 'improvised' form appear here: 'knowledge' (*ma'rifa*) a common derivation of the verb 'to know' (*'awafa*) and 'self' by means of the pronominal suffix *ka*. As mentioned above, it refers in this context to a mystical gnosis rather than a discursive knowledge (*'ilm*) (Landolt 2000: 31-32). It is a notion much loved and oft-repeated and commented upon because it ultimately points to the spiritual autonomy of the individual, rather than to a sacerdotal order of religious authorities. Baha'u'llah quotes it verbatim in numerous places (e.g. Bahá'u'lláh 1970: 102) to support his spiritual argument.

The next three brief passages (*Hidden Words-English*: 3-5, 7-8)<sup>17</sup> are analyzed here for the way they represent a restatement and artistic improvisation on the *hadith qudsi* discussed earlier:

I was a Hidden Treasure and yearned to be known.

So, I created mankind (lit. 'creation').<sup>18</sup>

The following verses from Baha'u'llah's *Hidden Words* read like a variation on this theme. For the convenience of the reader, the key correspondences are in bold:

16 See above note 5; Arabic: *man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu (Amuli 1989: 270, 307, 308, 315, 464, 675).*

17 *al-Kalimát al-Maknúna / The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* was published as a trilingual Arabic, Persian and English edition. Here it is referred to as *Hidden Words- Arabic, Hidden Words-Persian, or Hidden Words-English* as appropriate. The English is the translation of Shoghi Effendi 'with the assistance of some English friends' (*Hidden Words-English*: 1).

18 *kuntu kharzan makhfiyan wa alibabtu u'rifa fa khalaqtu al-khalqa.*

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.

O Son of Man

I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life.

O Son of Being

Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant.<sup>19</sup>

It should be borne in mind that the literary culture of the audience was a 'traditional' one; that is, as far as literary productions were concerned, a good commentary might stand for what our contemporary tastes would consider an original composition. Indeed, it could be argued that the literary tradition (and culture) with which we are concerned is in some ways, in its entirety, a commentary on the Qur'an (Lecomte 1965: 2). In the above three excerpts from the *Hidden Words* there is embedded in Baha'u'llah's text enough 'explicit allusions' to the original *hadith qudsi* to blur the line between original composition and commentary. The same literary method is at work in the Báb's *Qayyumi al-asma* (Lawson 1988a&b/1990) and in numerous other works of Baha'u'llah (Lewis 1999/2000 & 1994).

The differences between Baha'u'llah's treatment of the themes of love, knowledge and creation here, and that found in other works by Shi'i religious thinkers and writers, are characteristic and quite illustrative of the point being made here. Ultimately, these differences are very revealing about the basic relationship between the Baha'i Faith and Islam. In Baha'u'llah's *Hidden Words* there is no partisan polemic on the scholastic problems of the primacy of being over quiddity or

19 (*Hidden Words*-English: 3-5: 7-8); Arabic: *yá 'bna 'l-'insáni kuntu fi qidam dháti wa'zaliyyati kayyúminati 'araftu hubbi fika khaláqtuka wa'lqaytu 'alayka mihálfi w'zharitu laka jamá'li; yá 'bna 'l-'insáni 'ahbabtu khalqaka fakhalqituka fa'nlibi'bul kay 'adlikanaka wa fi rúhi 'l-hayát 'uthábituka; yá 'bna 'l-wajúdi 'ahbibni hi'uhibbaka 'in lam tuhíbbau lan 'uhibbaka 'abadan fa'rif yá 'abdu* (*Hidden Words*-Arabic: 5: 5).

vice versa, there is no petitioning of the Qur'an or statements of the Imams to support the 'argument'.<sup>20</sup> Rather, Baha'u'llah's *Hidden Words* are presented by Him as being completely their own authority. And of course, Baha'u'llah's *Hidden Words* manage to state what might be considered the essence of the matter in a brief – and therefore, according to certain prevailing literary standards – more eloquent and masterful way than lengthier scholastic discussions – through the irresistible power of the aphorism. The *Hidden Words*, though not rhymed, lend themselves to memorization and as such can cross another barrier, that between the literate and the non-literate.

Standard Shi'i works seek to demonstrate the truth of a specific and controversial philosophical or religious position and of necessity must rely very heavily on discursive argumentation. As such they frequently entail the use of aphorism or brief quotation of some pithy saying from the Qur'an, the statements of the Imams, or poetry, in supporting his argument. While Baha'u'llah's work also reflects the words of the Qur'an and the Imams, it does so in a much less explicit way. There are no direct quotations, beyond the 'musical notes' mentioned above, from the Qur'an or any other source in the *Hidden Words*. However, much of this Book may be considered a reiteration and confirmation of the sacred teachings of Islam. A symbol of the inner workings of the transformation under discussion here may be found in the case of the Báb's disciple Mulla Ali Bastami whose conviction by a court composed of both Shi'i and Sunni judges represents an unusual example of agreement between the two communities (Momen 1982). It may be that the new movement's ability to attract such united negative attention was paralleled by an ability to attract a similar positive attention from the religiously diverse Baghdadi audience.

Thus, Baha'u'llah's composition is both timeless and 'wondrously new' (*badi*). And in its newness it has managed to divest itself of communalistic baggage to become a neutral and transparent revelation in the social context of the mid-nineteenth century Ottoman 'province of Baghdad'. Of course such would eventually entail another allegiance. But that is a subject for another time. Today, this literary accomplishment, transposed onto a global scale with its attendant and exponentially more variegated audience, serves the idea of the greater unity

20 Note, however, Amuli's reading of this hadith as a clue to the understanding of the return of the hidden Imam (Amuli 1989: 102).



of the human race taught by the Bahai community.<sup>21</sup> It was an accomplishment in part inspired by and fashioned in response to the various dislocations attendant upon an earlier islamicate globalization.

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<sup>21</sup> Naturally, the *Hidden Words* had to be translated out of the original Arabic and Persian for this to happen. In the process of translation, much — but not all — of the 'confessional' Islam of the original has disappeared from view (Malouf 1997 and Lewis 1998).

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