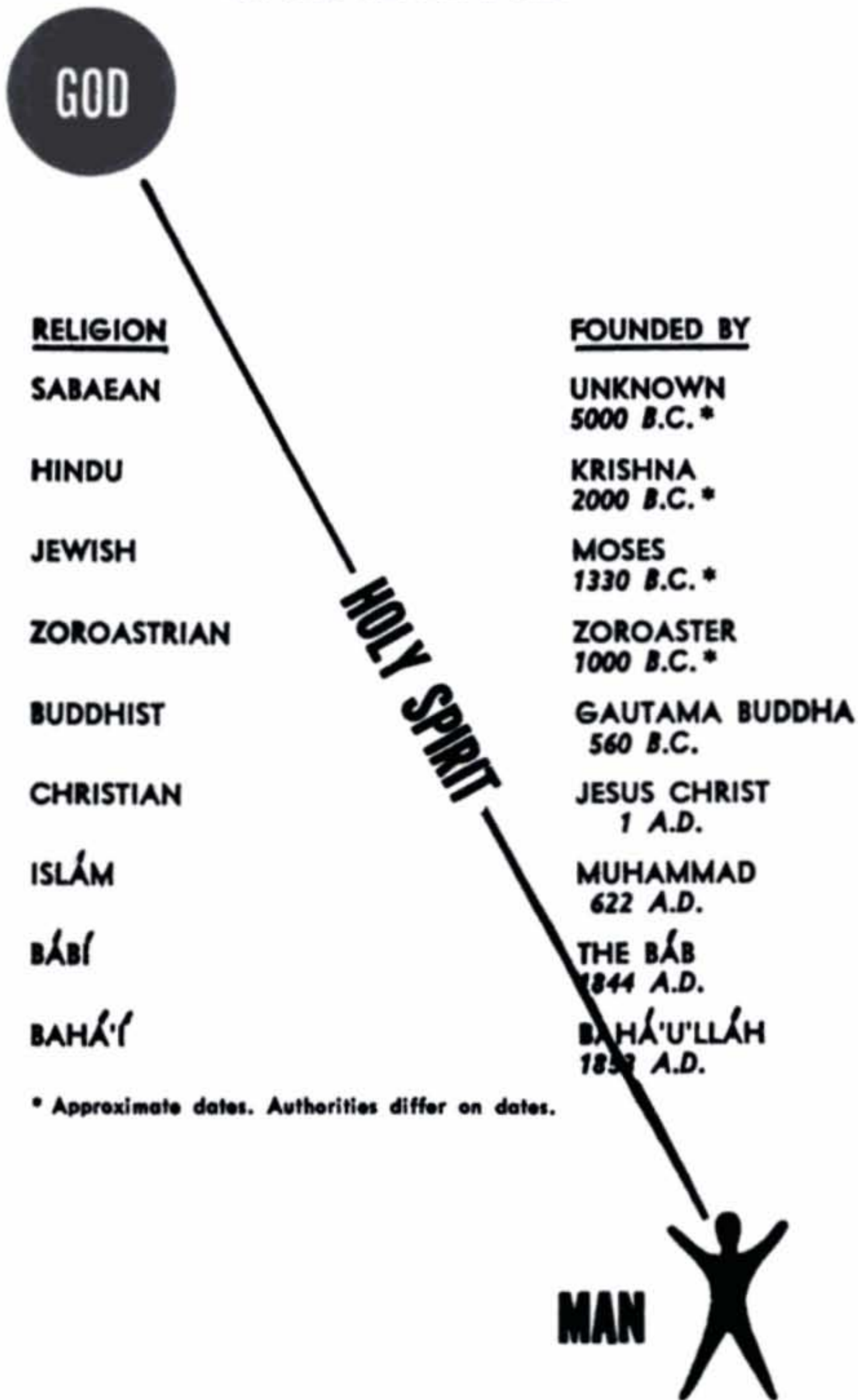


DIVINE REVELATORS



POPULAR CHART OF PROGRESSIVE REVELATION
included in the well-known Bahá'í pamphlet *One Universal Faith*

THE BAHÁ'Í PRINCIPLE OF RELIGIOUS UNITY: A DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVISM

Dann J. May

Every religion, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, has a particular focus, a central theme or vision that both grounds and informs all of its doctrines, teachings, and laws. For the Bahá'í Faith, this central theme "is the consciousness of the oneness of mankind."¹ The theological foundation and key prerequisite for the realization of the oneness of humanity is the Bahá'í principle of the essential unity of the world's religions. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Bahá'í principle of religious unity is "the cornerstone" of the oneness of all people and the very foundation for its realization in the world of human affairs.² Bahá'u'lláh asserts, moreover, that the fundamental purpose of religious faith "is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men."³ The principal reason that the necessity of religious unity must lie at the heart of the oneness of humankind rests in the conviction that religious faith is the sole basis from which people will find the necessary motivation, devotion, and vision to accomplish truly global fellowship among the peoples of the world. Wilfred Cantwell Smith is typical of many religious thinkers around the world who have recognized the role of faith in such an undertaking:

The task of constructing even that minimum degree of world fellowship that will be necessary for man to survive at all is far too great to be

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accomplished on any other than a religious basis. From no other source than his faith, I believe, can man muster the energy, devotion, vision, resolution, capacity to survive disappointment, that will be necessary—that are necessary—for this challenge.⁴

Since the Bahá'í Faith would recognize its own aims and objectives in this line of reasoning, it should come as no surprise when Shoghi Effendi asserts that:

The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh . . . is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the nonessential aspects of their doctrines, and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual development of human society.⁵

Thus, while the oneness of humankind is the “pivotal principle” and central vision of the Bahá'í Faith, its realization rests on the doctrine of religious unity.

The Bahá'í principle of religious unity may be unique in the history of revealed religion. Unlike other post-revelational theologies, it is one of several foundational doctrines of the Bahá'í Faith whose source is to be found within its own sacred writings rather than in interpretation and commentary.⁶ Indeed, there is no lack of clear scriptural references to this important principle in the Bahá'í canon. In fact, an entire volume of Bahá'u'lláh's sacred writings, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (The Book of Certitude), has the concept of religious unity as one of its central themes.

One becomes aware, however, of a noticeable gap when one begins to review the theological literature written by Bahá'í scholars on the topic of religious unity. It seems that the principle of religious unity is so central to the Bahá'í Faith, so obvious and compelling that little serious writing has been done on the subject and the potential problematic nature of the unity paradigm has been scarcely addressed by Bahá'í scholars. Hatcher and Martin's *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (1984), intended to serve as a textbook on the Bahá'í Faith, devotes only three pages to the principle of religious unity.⁷ The welcome recent exception is Udo Schaefer's instructive

essay "Bahá'u'lláh's *Einheitsparadigma und die Konkurrenz religioser Wahrheitsansprüche*" title translated as *Beyond the Clash of Religions. The Emergence of a New Paradigm* (1995), which sets out the Bahá'í interpretation of religious unity as the new paradigm of the age, while at the same time accounting for religious diversity.⁸

The Bahá'í doctrine of religious unity raises a number of questions. In those writings where the principle of religious unity is mentioned it is often unclear what the Bahá'í writings intend by such phrases as "the religions of God," "all religions," "the divine religions," or "all the Prophets." Do such phrases mean what Muslims intend by the term *ahl al-kitáb*, literally "the people of the Book" (i.e., Jews, Christians, Muslims, and perhaps Zoroastrians)? Most often, the only examples cited in the Bahá'í corpus are from these traditions. In fact, in the sacred writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, these are the only religious traditions mentioned, although 'Abdu'l-Bahá's authoritative interpretations of Bahá'u'lláh's writings state that the Buddha originally established the oneness of God and a new religion.⁹ Or do such phrases also include the religious traditions of Asia (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Chinese religions, and so on) since these faiths are occasionally mentioned in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice? Or does the Bahá'í view also include the vast and varied so-called tribal or indigenous traditions of the world? In any case, such generic terms raise questions about the very real and profound differences that exist between the various religious traditions, let alone those differences that exist within each one.

Another possible hermeneutic approach may be that what is intended by such phrases is not to be taken literally but symbolically. This raises the further question of whether the Bahá'í view is a descriptive statement about the world's religions or a symbolic one lacking any cognitive content. Is the Bahá'í view an assertion about the true nature of religion, or a symbolic or mythological statement, designed to provide a coherent worldview in order to foster better relations between Bahá'ís and the people of other faiths? Despite the existence of many capable Bahá'í scholars around the world, answers to these questions have not been worked out in any detail.

EXEGESIS OF IMPORTANT TERMS AND PHRASES

A fuller understanding of the Bahá'í principle of religious unity rests significantly on the understanding and interpretation of key

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Bahá'í phrases. Since Bahá'í scriptural terminology is in large part derived from Islamic theology, the exegesis that follows will depend heavily on Islamic sources.

Initially we may ask how the phrases “all religions” and “all the Prophets,” both of which are employed in the Bahá'í scriptures to refer collectively to the world's religions and their founders, are to be interpreted. These phrases, together with other similar ones such as “the divine religions” or “the religions of God,” are the usual English translations of the corresponding Arabic or Persian terms. The phrase “all religions” is the English translation of the Arabic *al-adyan kulliha* and the Persian *jami'-yi adyan*.¹⁰ *Adyan* is the plural of *dín*, the Arabic and Persian word for “religion,” while *kulliha* and *jami* are the Arabic and Persian words for “all.”¹¹ Islamic sources define *dín* as “religion’ in the broadest sense,” thus, it “may mean any religion” or even religious knowledge as opposed to intellectual knowledge; but it is primarily used in the Qur'an to refer to “the religion of Islam” (*dín al-Islam*).¹² When other religions are mentioned in the Qur'an, the Arabic word *milla* (lit., “religion” or “sect”) is used. However, this meaning is now largely obsolete in the Arabic speaking world.¹³ Nevertheless, the phrase “all religions” and its variants are still unclear, for it is not immediately obvious what religious traditions are intended by such phrases.

As a partial clarification of the question, it may be said that the authoritative writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi do include the names of other religions. For example, in the letters written in English on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, there are references made to the “nine existing religions,” those being the Bahá'í Faith, the religion of the Báb (Babism), Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the religion of the Sabians. While Shoghi Effendi recognizes the problematic and controversial nature of such a list, he does not consider these nine religions as “the only true religions that have appeared in the world.”¹⁴ In fact, other religious groups (e.g., Confucians, Sikhs, and Native Americans) are positively mentioned in Bahá'í canonical literature.¹⁵ Furthermore, within the Bahá'í scriptures, the number nine is symbolic for completeness or wholeness because it is seen as the completion or culmination of the single digit numbers.¹⁶ Consequently, the use of the phrase “nine existing religions” can be interpreted metaphorically to refer to all religions.

The obscure reference to the Sabians as one of the “nine existing religions” is cryptic. However, an analysis of this term will shed some

light on what the Bahá'í writings intend by such phrases as "all the religions." The Sabians (Arabic: *Sabi*, pl. *Sabi'un*) are first mentioned in the Qur'an (2:59, 5:73, and 22:17), but their identity has long been problematic.¹⁷ The Qur'an identifies the Sabians, along with the Jews and the Christians (and by implication, the Zoroastrians) as *ahl al-Kitáb*, those who have received revealed scriptures. Islamic sources identify at least two distinct groups associated with the term *Sabians*:

- (1) *the Mandaeans or Subbas*, a Judeo-Christian sect practising the rites of baptism in Mesopotamia (i.e., Christian followers of John the Baptist);
- (2) *The Sabaeans of Harran*, a pagan sect which survived for a considerable period under Islam.¹⁸

A clear identification of the Sabians is further hampered by the fact that many groups, upon encountering Islam, often claimed adherence to the Sabian religion mentioned in the Qur'an in order not to be put to the sword and to benefit from the quranic privileges and the protection associated with the *ahl al-Kitáb*. Furthermore, sympathetic Muslims frequently employed the term upon encountering peoples of diverse religious faiths including Mazdaens in Mesopotamia and Iran, Samaritans in Palestine, Buddhists and Hindus in India, and followers of tribal religions in East Africa.¹⁹ Despite the confusing use of the term, Christopher Buck, employing an historical methodology based on the use of both Muslim and Christian sources, persuasively argues that the original quranic Sabians were southern Mesopotamian peoples (i.e., Mandaeans and Elchasaites) practising various purification rituals.²⁰ In summing up the problems associated with the term, Buck concludes:

Exactly because it was imprecise, the word *sabi'un* functioned as a term of great legal importance by contributing to an attitude of toleration towards minority religions under Muslim rule. The term evolved from a once-specific designation to a classification which, adapted to ever new historical contexts, expanded its meaning to embrace peoples of otherwise uncertain standing, giving them a place of security within a Quranically sanctioned framework.²¹

Accordingly, the designation "Sabians," as it is used in the Islamic world, appears to be inclusive in nature, and may thus be used by Bahá'ís as a reference to any religion not specifically mentioned in the Qur'an. Moreover, since the term *Sabians* was applied to so-called

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“pagan” groups (i.e., religions other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam; or religions that predate them) its use may best be interpreted as symbolically referring to all ancient, tribal, or indigenous religions. This interpretation would make viable an alternative interpretation of the Bahá’í listing of the “nine existing religions,” since tribal or indigenous religions, which claim some 112 million people world wide, are rarely mentioned otherwise.²²

In the Bahá’í scriptures, the phrases “all the Prophets” or “all the Prophets of God” are often used to refer collectively to various prophets or, to use the Bahá’í term, “Manifestations” (Arabic: *mazhar*, “manifestation” of the essence of God), those extraordinary individuals who initiated and founded the various religious traditions.²³ Such phrases are the English translations of the Persian *jami’ anbiyá*. *Anbiyá* is the plural of the Arabic and Persian word *nabí*, meaning a prophet, that is, one “whose mission lies within the framework of an existing religion” (e.g., Ezekiel or Isaiah), as opposed to a *rasúl* (“Messenger” or “Envoy,” pl. *rusúl*), one “who brings a new religion or major new revelation,” such as Christ or Muhammad.²⁴ This distinction between a *rasúl* and a *nabí* has been recently challenged by Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir in their essay “A Bahá’í Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam,”²⁵ which contains a good analysis of these and other related terms. It should be noted, however, that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses a similar terminology to distinguish between what he terms the “independent” and “dependent” prophets. The independent prophets are those who bring new laws and claim a new revelation (e.g., Moses, Christ, Muhammad, and Bahá’u’lláh) while the dependent prophets are those who work within an existing religious tradition (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Confucius).²⁶

According to the British scholar of religion, Geoffrey Parrinder, the Qur’an mentions twenty-eight prophets and messengers by name—including many of those mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament.²⁷ The Qur’an, however, does not seem to limit their number to twenty-eight. In fact, it indicates that there have been countless prophets sent throughout the history of the human race. For many of these prophets, the details of their lives are lost in the mists of ancient history and prehistory. Concerning these prophets, the Qur’an states:

We did aforetime send Messengers [*rusúl*] before thee: of them there are some whose story we have related to thee, and some whose story we have

not related to thee. (Qur'an 40:78)

And there never was a people without a warner [*nadhír*] having lived among them. (Qur'an 35:24)²⁸

No doubt, on this basis, later Islamic theologians and scholars increased the number of prophets well beyond twenty-eight. Indeed, even in the *hadíth*, the collected sayings of Muhammad, the number of prophets is symbolically said to be 124,000, a number so large as to both dazzle the imagination and prevent humanity from claiming that it was not adequately warned of universal judgment.²⁹

Like the Qur'an, the Bahá'í scriptures contain the names of numerous prophets and messengers. To be precise, at least thirty-two prophets are mentioned by name in the Bahá'í writings, twenty-three of which are identical to those mentioned in the Qur'an. A significant difference about the prophets named in the Bahá'í writings is that, whereas the Qur'an names only prophets associated with Abrahamic heritage, the Bahá'í scriptures include "prophets" or founders of religion from Asian cultures, Zoroaster (Zarathustra), the Buddha, Confucius, and Krishna.

Also, like the Qur'an, the Bahá'í writings do not limit the number of these individuals to thirty-two. Thus, the Báb declares: "God hath raised up Prophets and revealed Books as numerous as the creatures of the world, and will continue to do so to everlasting."³⁰ This would, theoretically at least, make the number of prophets practically infinite, or at the very least, even larger than the highest numbers mentioned in Islam. In fact, Shoghi Effendi, while quoting from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, asserts that:

From the "*beginning that hath no beginning*," these Exponents of the Unity of God and Channels of His incessant utterance have shed the light of the invisible Beauty upon mankind, and will continue, to the "*end that hath no end*," to vouchsafe fresh revelations of His might and additional experiences of His inconceivable glory. To contend that any particular religion is final, that "*all Revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the daysprings of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, that the ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the Tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest*" would indeed be nothing less than sheer blasphemy.³¹

Clearly then, the Bahá'í writings recognize the existence of vast numbers of Manifestations who have appeared in all cultures throughout the history of the human race. Thus, given such references, the phrase "all the Prophets" is best interpreted as broadly and as open-endedly as possible. Such an interpretation would include all known historical prophets, messengers, and founders of the world's religions, whether of the past, present, or future, together with all those whose identity has now been lost. Similarly, the phrase "all religions" should also be interpreted in the widest possible context to include all known existing religions together with those that are no longer practiced.

TRANSCENDENT UNITY

According to the Bahá'í Writings, the nature of reality is ultimately a unity, in contrast to a view that would postulate a multiplicity of differing or incommensurate realities. In other words, the nature of truth is unitary and not pluralistic. In a talk delivered in New York City in December 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that "oneness is truth and truth is oneness which does not admit of plurality."³² In a similar vein, during a talk in Paris in October 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that "Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one."³³

The Bahá'í principle of the unity of religions is grounded on this basic conception of the oneness of reality (*al haqq*). This principle, so frequently discussed in the Bahá'í sacred writings, asserts that a common transcendent truth not only lies above the varying and divergent religious traditions but also is their ultimate source and inspiration. For example, the Báb claims in *The Book of Names* (Arabic: *Kitáb-i Asmá*) that "every religion proceedeth from God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting," while Bahá'u'lláh, in referring to the religions of the world, writes that "these principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are rays of one Light."³⁴ In the most direct and concise passage on the subject, Bahá'u'lláh maintains that the revelation that each Manifestation or Messenger of God receives "is exalted above the veils of plurality and the exigencies of number."³⁵ Finally, in the *Kitáb-i Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh even refers to God as "the Lord of all Religions."³⁶

It should be clear from the passages quoted above that the Bahá'í principle of religious unity affirms the existence of a common

transcendent source from which the world's religious traditions originate and receive their inspiration. As such, the Bahá'í view is remarkably similar to the thought of Frithjof Schuon, a Swiss metaphysician and Sufi mystic who persuasively argues for what he terms the "transcendent unity of religions," which he claims lies at the very heart of every religious tradition.³⁷ Like the Bahá'í Faith, Schuon holds that the religions of the world originate from the same ultimate source. "The Divine Will," writes Schuon, "has distributed the one Truth under different forms or, to express it in another way, between different humanities."³⁸ Writing on the same subject and in similar language, Bahá'u'lláh insists that:

There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed.³⁹

It should be obvious from this reference that Bahá'u'lláh, like Schuon, is not affirming that all religions are the same, for he alludes to the differences among them. Indeed, he claims that the religions of the world only seem to be dissimilar due to "the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated."⁴⁰ In other words, the apparent differences that exist among the various religious traditions are due to particular cultural and historical factors.

While this scriptural explanation is a recurrent theme throughout the Bahá'í writings, it is certainly not unique to the Bahá'í Faith, although it significantly predates modern scholastic interpretations. Such cultural and historical factors have been recognized and discussed by several scholars of religion. For instance, the philosopher of religion, Patrick Burke, argues that:

The principle by which religions resemble and differ from one another is not religious, but cultural. Similarities and differences between religions are similarities and differences between cultures. . . . It is these cultural elements that confer on any particular religion its distinctive identity. . . . What appear to be conflicts between religious faiths must be seen then, first and foremost as conflicts between cultural values.⁴¹

Nevertheless, the Bahá'í writings are quite explicit that such differences are not intrinsic nor innate to the ultimate source of these

religions. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh's argument about the Prophets of God is as follows:

It is clear and evident, therefore, that any apparent variation in the intensity of their light is not inherent in the light itself, but should rather be attributed to the varying receptivity of an ever-changing world. Every Prophet Whom the Almighty and Peerless Creator hath purposed to send to the peoples of the earth hath been entrusted with a Message, and charged to act in a manner that would best meet the requirements of the age in which He appeared.⁴²

THE TWOFOLD NATURE OF EVERY RELIGION

While the Bahá'í principle of religious unity does not claim that all the religions are the same, it does claim that they all share certain fundamental and essential features that are distinguished from other nonessential aspects related to the historical, cultural, and linguistic context in which each religious tradition develops. Consequently, the Bahá'í writings, while recognizing the existence of religious diversity, seek to explain it as secondary to an essential transcendental unity common to all religious traditions. For example, in a talk delivered at the Church of the Ascension, in New York City, on June 2, 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá presents an often-repeated explanation of the Bahá'í view of religious unity, a view that is known as "the twofold nature of religion":

The religions of God have the same foundation, but the dogmas appearing later have differed. Each of the divine religions has two aspects. *The first is essential. It concerns morality and development of the virtues of the human world.* This aspect is common to all. It is fundamental; it is one; there is no difference, no variation in it. As regards the inculcation of morality and the development of human virtues, there is no difference whatsoever between the teachings of Zoroaster, Jesus and Bahá'u'lláh. In this they agree; they are one. *The second aspect of the divine religions is nonessential.* It concerns human needs and undergoes change in every cycle according to the exigency of the time.⁴³

'Abdu'l-Bahá, both in his writings and in his public presentations, constantly elaborates these two aspects of religion. For instance, in a talk delivered at the *Foyer de l'âme* in Paris, 'Abdu'l-Bahá argues that:

All these divisions we see on all sides, all these disputes and opposition, are caused because men cling to ritual and outward observances, and forget the simple, underlying truth. It is the outward practices of religion that are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity—while the reality is always the same, and one. The Reality is the Truth, and truth has no division.⁴⁴

The Bahá'í concept of the twofold nature of religion distinguishes between two basic aspects held to be characteristic of every religious tradition: the first is characterized as “essential” or “fundamental” and refers to spiritual matters, while the second is characterized as “nonessential” or “accidental” and refers to matters related to the material or physical world. The essential aspect consists of “fundamental” and “universal truths” which are considered to be changeless and eternal and which constitute “the one foundation of all the religions of God.”⁴⁵ These universal truths lie at the core of every religious tradition and, according to the Bahá'í writings, consist of faith in God (or, in nontheistic terms, ultimate reality), existential truths of life, the awakening of human potential, and the acquisition of spiritual attributes or virtues.⁴⁶ Similarly, the philosopher of religion John Hick underscores the importance of the acquisition of virtues when he states that “love, compassion, generous concern for and commitment to the welfare of others is a central ideal” in each of the world's religious traditions.⁴⁷

In contrast, the nonessential aspect of religion involves the outward form of religious practice and operates within the sphere of linguistic, cultural, and historical circumstances. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues that the “divine religions of the Holy Manifestations of God are in reality one though in name and nomenclature they differ.”⁴⁸ In addition, the nonessential aspect further consists of the social laws and regulations governing human affairs as well as ritual practices and doctrinal beliefs, which vary in every age and culture and even within any one religious tradition, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has so persuasively argued.⁴⁹ For example, most if not all religious traditions stress the importance of the institution of marriage and the role of the family life, but they all differ on the particulars of the marriage ceremony, the rights and obligations of the husband, wife, and children, and the circumstances under which divorce is granted.

The distinction between the essential and nonessential aspects of religion is not unique to Bahá'í theology. It resembles closely the “form

versus content” or “accident versus essence” debate over the content of myth. In his comprehensive four-volume work on mythology, *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell makes the distinction between what he calls the *local* manifestation of myth and ritual within a particular culture (what the Bahá’í writings call the nonessential or accidental aspects) and the *universal* aspects (what the Bahá’í writings call the essential or fundamental aspects) which go beyond what is historically and culturally determined.⁵⁰ As with the Bahá’í view, it is the local manifestations of the universal aspects that differ and seem at variance with one another. This distinction between the essential and nonessential aspects of religion is also advanced by the historian Arnold Toynbee. Within every religious tradition, writes Toynbee, “there are essential counsels and truths, and there are nonessential practices and propositions.”⁵¹

FAITH: A COMMON DENOMINATOR

Besides the recognition of a transcendental unity of religions, the Bahá’í writings also emphasize the process of personal transformation brought about through faith as another unifying factor in all religious traditions. For this reason, the Bahá’í scriptures make a distinction between *institutionalized religion*, which involves ritual performance, traditional practice, and accumulated doctrine, and *faith*—that deeply personal attitude, feeling, and inward response of an individual to the transcendent, a response that usually has a powerful transforming effect on an individual and expresses itself in outward practice and belief.⁵²

In the Bahá’í sacred writings, the Arabic word *imán* is usually translated into English as the word *faith*. According to the Islamic scholar Cyril Glasse, *imán* refers to “those articles of belief which are part of Islam” such as “faith in God, His Angels, His books (revelations), His Prophets, and the Day of Judgement.”⁵³ *Imán* is also understood as one of three aspects that make up Islam as religion (*dín*), those other two being *islam* (the rites, practices, and laws) and *ihsan* (virtue). However, as with the corresponding English terms *religion* and *faith*; the words *imán*, *islam*, and *dín* are often used ambiguously and interchangeably. Despite such ambiguity, philosophers, theologians, and scholars of religion often distinguish between the concepts of faith on the one hand and religion or practice on the other.

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, often draws a distinction between faith and religion in his letters to individual

Bahá'ís. In such letters, he frequently contrasts those Bahá'ís “whose religion is Bahá'í,” those who merely “accept and observe the teachings” or call themselves Bahá'ís, from those “who live for the Faith,” whose lives are transformed, “ennobled and enlightened.”⁵⁴ He further clarifies this difference by contrasting “spiritual awareness” (personal faith) with “administrative procedure” and “adherence to rules” (institutionalized religion):

The need is very great, everywhere in the world, in and outside the [Bahá'í] Faith, for a true spiritual awareness to pervade and motivate people's lives. No amount of administrative procedure or adherence to rules can take the place of this soul-characteristic, this spirituality which is the essence of man.⁵⁵

Indeed, Shoghi Effendi characterizes such spiritual awareness as “that mystical feeling which unites man with God,” which, he declares, is at “the core of religious faith.”

*For the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling that unites man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason why Bahá'u'lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. It is not sufficient for a believer to merely accept and observe the teachings. He should, in addition, cultivate the sense of spirituality, which he can acquire chiefly by the means of prayer. The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man which first has to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide. Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into mere organization, and become a dead thing.*⁵⁶

He [Bahá'u'lláh] further claims that the fundamental purpose of religions is to bring man nearer to God, and to change his character, which is of the utmost importance. Too much emphasis is often laid on the social and economic aspects of the Teachings; but the moral aspect cannot be overemphasized.⁵⁷

It is the moral life and the personal response of the individual to divinity that is considered by Bahá'ís to lie at the basis of the religious life, a life that must be transformed through the acquisition of virtues and the spiritual nourishment of prayer and meditation, and not the

mere adherence to various doctrines and teachings, nor the pious participation in ceremonies and rituals, holidays and commemorations. Thus, Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, distills the essence of the Bahá'í view in the following statement:

Every other Word of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings is a preachment on moral and ethical conduct; all else is the form, the chalice, into which the pure spirit must be poured; without the spirit and the action which must demonstrate it, it is a lifeless form.⁵⁸

This distinction between the spirit and the form of religious faith is also echoed in the words of the great Hindu teacher Sri Ramakrishna when he pleads:

Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each, which is spirituality. . . . Earn that first, acquire that, criticise no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them.⁵⁹

Thus, it should be clear that when the Bahá'í writings declare that the religious traditions share certain fundamental and essential aspects, it is primarily the transforming power of faith and its effects upon the individual and upon society as a whole that is meant. In other words, it is the religious life itself, the process of transformation that brings the individual nearer to God or ultimate reality, that is considered to be an essential feature of every religion. And while the particular path or outward expression may vary, it is the result or goal, and the process which leads to it, that are held to be the same. To take a commonplace analogy: there are many paths and approaches that may be used to scale a difficult and challenging mountain (differences in technique, equipment used, and so on) but they all share a common goal: reaching the summit.⁶⁰ Or, seen from a more philosophical perspective, Hick has effectively argued that

the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is manifestly taking place—and taking place, so far as human observation can tell, to much the same extent. Thus the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological

“spaces” within which, or “ways” along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/ enlightenment/fulfillment.⁶¹

Accordingly, for Hick, while the various religious traditions differ in terms of their outward expression or linguistic form, in their attempts to describe and approach “the Real” (*al haqq*, his general term for divinity or the absolute), yet they all are involved in a similar process. No doubt this is what Ramakrishna is referring to when he suggests:

As one and the same water, is called by different names in different languages, one calling it “water,” another “Vatri,” a third “aqua,” and a fourth “Pani,” so the one Sachchidananda, Absolute Being-Intelligence-Bliss, is invoked by some as God, by some as Allah, by some as Hari, and by others as Brahman. . . . As one can ascend to the roof of a house by means of a ladder or a bamboo, or a staircase or in various other ways, so diverse are the ways and means to approach God. Every religion in the world is one of the ways to reach Him.⁶²

In all of the cases that have been considered thus far, it is terminology and outward practice that are different, while the process, the conscious and active life of faith and its effects on the individual, is declared to be common to the various religious traditions. Similarly, in his influential book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, W. C. Smith argues that “faith differs in form, but not in kind. This applies both within communities and from one community to another.”⁶³ In this work, Smith further argues that while almost all cultures have a word for *faith* or its equivalents (i.e., piety, religiosity, or reverence), very few have a term corresponding to the Western notion of religion as an empirical phenomenon—an overt system of principles and practices separate from other aspects of life.⁶⁴ In fact, Smith argues that when a culture coins a word for “religion” as an overt abstract system, it is well on its way to losing sight of the importance of faith.

I have pointed out that the Bahá'í writings contrast faith with religion, that system of practices and traditions, rites and beliefs, which, if followed only in an outward sense, often degenerates into a mere organization. It is religion as mere organization, devoid of the transforming power of faith, which the Bahá'í writings point to as the source of so much of the diversity, conflict, and dissension that have so often characterized the religious traditions of the world. Furthermore,

the Bahá'í concept of religious unity is not some isolated or obscure notion, since it has its parallel expressions in such diverse thinkers as Ramakrishna, Hick, Schuon, and W. C. Smith. It is equally clear that the Bahá'í concept is not so much about the existence of similar doctrines or beliefs, but rather about the transformation that religion is capable of effecting in the moral and religious life of an individual—a life transformed and animated by and through the power of faith.

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

On strictly empirical grounds, asserts David Tracy, “diversity or plurality is a fact” of the world in which we live. Moreover, Tracy continues, “in every discipline it is the sheer plurality of the subject matter that needs some explanation.”⁶⁵ This is no less true of philosophy, theology, or religious studies. Indeed, our modern awareness of the tremendous variety manifested by the world’s religious traditions has spawned a wide-ranging interest in the general field of religious pluralism.

The term “religious pluralism” so prevalent today in the writings of scholars of religion requires a brief explanation. “Pluralism” has at least two distinct meanings. A first meaning expresses the growing tendency toward openness, tolerance, and interreligious dialogue found among many modern religious communities, while a second meaning takes note of the tremendous diversity found both within and among the world’s religious traditions.⁶⁶ It is especially within the context of this second meaning that one may speak of a theology or even a philosophy of religious pluralism.

Over the centuries, several distinct theories have been propounded to explain the great variety observed in the world’s religious traditions, what Wilfred Cantwell Smith aptly describes as “the arresting diversity of mankind’s faith.”⁶⁷ Such religious diversity is what many historians of religion call the problem of religious pluralism. According to Hick, “the term *religious pluralism* refers simply to the fact that the history of religions shows a plurality of traditions and a plurality of variations within each.”⁶⁸

TYOLOGY OF RESPONSES TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

In his essay, “Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge,” global theologian Raimundo Panikkar presents a typology of six possible options for coming to terms with religious pluralism. Panikkar

divides these options into two broad categories: the first five he groups under “monistic options” and the sixth he assigns to what he calls the “non-dualistic option.”

(A) **Monistic Options:** All approaches to the problem of religious pluralism in which truth is said to be one, either one for all or one for every single individual.

(1) *False Claims:* All religions are false because of the falsity of their claim. There is no such ultimate destiny or Reality.

(2) *Subjectivism:* Each religion is true because it is the best for its adherents. Truth is subjective.

(3) *Exclusivism:* Only one religion is true. All the others are, at best, approximations.

(4) *Inclusivism/Primordial Tradition/Perennial Philosophy:* Religions share a common essence or refer ultimately to the same truth although in approximations. They all point to Reality and may all be included in a single world view.

(5) *Historical Process/Historical Relativism:* Religions are the products of history and thus are both similar and different according to the historical factors that have shaped them.

(B) **Non-Dualistic Option**

(1) *Radical pluralism/Post-Modernism:* Each religion has unique features and presents mutually incommensurable insights. Each statement of a basic experience is to be evaluated on its proper terrain and merits because the very nature of truth is pluralistic.⁶⁹

The last four of Panikkar's options are those most often debated in discussions of religious pluralism. Whereas Panikkar finds fault with the first five options, he makes a strong case for option six, that of radical pluralism. While the Bahá'í tradition accepts the existence of religious diversity, it acknowledges a common source for the world's religions and it recognizes certain underlying patterns and trends that historical and cultural factors both partially obscure and reveal. Thus, on the surface, the Bahá'í principle of religious unity seems to be inclusivistic, although a more careful examination of this principle reveals that it incorporates elements of perspectivism and historical process. I will examine below the Bahá'í concept of religious unity in

light of Panikkar's typology and some contemporary Western theories of religious pluralism that resemble the Bahá'í concept.

THE BAHÁ'Í REPUDIATION OF RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVITY

In using the Bahá'í principle of religious unity as a criterium, three of Panikkar's options can be immediately ruled out. Obviously, the Bahá'í conception of religious unity does not deny the existence of a divine or ultimate reality. On the contrary, the Bahá'í view holds that the world's religious traditions originate from the same ultimate reality and, consequently, they all contain certain universal truths. It should also be obvious that the Bahá'í view cannot be considered subjectivistic, since it holds that religious truths, especially those that concern the nature of ultimate reality, are not simply what I or anyone else make them out to be. Indeed, Bahá'í theology is grounded in the conception that ultimate reality is completely beyond the comprehension of human beings. In a wider discussion of Bahá'í theology, Bahá'í scholar J. A. McLean, as does Stephen N. Lambden in the essay found in this volume, borrows from the Sufi apophatic tradition to designate this conception of ultimate reality as "Bahá'u'lláh's negative theology" of the unmanifested God (*God-Hahut*).⁷⁰ Given such considerations, the Bahá'í writings address the need for an intermediary or Manifestation of God who mediates between the unmanifested God and humankind and whose primary functions include the revelation of religious truth and the manifestation of divine attributes.

Finally, and most significantly, the Bahá'í approach to other religions is clearly not exclusivistic. Nowhere in the Bahá'í corpus of sacred writings do we find the claim that one and only one religion is true or correct, to the exclusion of all the rest. Indeed, a central Bahá'í principle related to the oneness of religion is that "religious truth is not absolute but relative," that it is not static but dynamic and that the process of "Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."⁷¹ In fact, according to Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'u'lláh not only rejected the claim of any religion to be a final revelation, but he also disclaimed the finality of his own revelation:

Repudiating the claim of any religion to be the final revelation of God to man, disclaiming finality for His own Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh inculcates the basic principle of the relativity of religious truth, the continuity of Divine Revelation, the progressiveness of religious experience. . . .⁷²

The Bahá'í repudiation of religious exclusivism is more fully elaborated by Shoghi Effendi in his essay "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh." Near the end of this powerfully written essay, he unequivocally asserts:

... great as is the power manifested by this Revelation and however vast the range of the Dispensation its Author has inaugurated, it emphatically repudiates the claim to be regarded as the final revelation of God's will and purpose for mankind. To hold such a conception of its character and functions would be tantamount to a betrayal of its cause and a denial of its truth. It must necessarily conflict with the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final. Indeed, the categorical rejection by the followers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh of the claim to finality which any religious system inaugurated by the Prophets of the past may advance is as clear and emphatic as their own refusal to claim that same finality for the Revelation with which they stand identified. "To believe that all revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the daysprings of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, that the ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest" must constitute in the eyes of every follower of the Faith a grave, an inexcusable departure from one of its most cherished and fundamental principles.⁷³

BAHÁ'Í INCLUSIVISM: GUARDING AGAINST OVERSIMPLIFICATION

Several writers of histories of religion have characterized the Bahá'í view as inclusivist. For instance, in her textbook *Living Religions*, Mary Pat Fisher mentions the Bahá'í Faith as one of several examples of inclusivism. While Huston Smith does not use the term in *The World's Religions*, a revised version of his popular textbook *The Religions of Man*, his discussion of the Bahá'í Faith would clearly place it in this category.⁷⁴ There is also what appears to be direct scriptural evidence within the Bahá'í writings to support an inclusivist label. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written:

The Bahá'í Cause is an inclusive movement; the teachings of all religions and societies are found here. . . . The Bahá'í message is a call to religious

unity and not an invitation to a new religion, not a new path to immortality. God forbid! It is the ancient path cleared of the debris of imaginations and superstitions of men, of the debris of strife and misunderstanding.⁷⁵

'Abdu'l-Bahá claims that the Bahá'í Faith is not simply another religion, but "the ancient path," which his father, Bahá'u'lláh, describes as "the changeless Faith of God [Arabic: *dín Alláh*], eternal in the past, eternal in the future."⁷⁶

By reading these and other passages in isolation from the vast and overall context of the Bahá'í sacred writings, one may find superficial support for characterizing the Bahá'í Faith as inclusivistic. However, the inclusivist label is far too simplistic. It does not adequately describe the complex, subtle, and multi-faceted Bahá'í position, especially as it is developed by Bahá'u'lláh in such works as the *Kitáb-i Íqán*. Indeed, the Bahá'í Faith continually frustrates such easy and simplistic classifications. For example, while Bahá'í theology might be described by some as liberal or conversely even radical, its strict moral standards might be characterized by others as conservative. While the Bahá'í view does incorporate what might be considered to be inclusivistic elements, these elements must be understood in their relationship with other well-known Bahá'í principles such as the concept of "the relativity of religious truth," the admonition to foster and preserve "unity in diversity," and the notion that the religions of the world are involved in a dynamic historical process, what Bahá'ís call "progressive revelation."

Modifications of the inclusivist position include perspectivist theories of religious pluralism, of which John Hick's theory, as he presents it in his recent book *An Interpretation of Religion*, is typical.⁷⁷ Hick's perspectivism is grounded on the Kantian distinction made between *noumenon* and *phenomenon*, between an entity *an sich* ("in itself") as unperceived by anyone, and an entity as perceived by human beings. Consequently, Hick makes a distinction between ultimate reality *an sich* and ultimate reality as experienced and perceived by different religious traditions.⁷⁸ Hick categorizes these varying perceptions into two broad categories: (1) the Real (Hick's general term for the absolute) understood as a deity or god, and as having a divine persona (e.g., Yahweh, Shiva, Vishnu, Ahura Mazda, Allah, God the Father, the Great Spirit, and so on), and (2) the Real understood as a non-personal Absolute, or as the ground of being, or as the animating force in the universe (e.g., the Taoist conception of the Tao, the varying

Mahayana Buddhist conceptions of *dharma*, *shunyata*, or *nirvana*, the Advaita Vedanta conception of Brahman, or the Chinese understanding of Tien).

Armed with this distinction, Hick contends that the various understandings of ultimate reality propounded by the religions of the world are not incommensurate views but differing perspectives of the same reality. Accordingly, since reality is understood from a host of differing perspectives, we find among the world's religious traditions, a plurality of perceptions about reality. In summarizing his own position, Hick writes that "the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human."⁷⁹

Having dealt with diverse understandings of ultimate reality, Hick proceeds to explain the apparent differences in metaphysical, cosmological, and eschatological conceptions of the world's religions by viewing all such matters as within the domain of what he calls "myth, mystery and unanswered questions."⁸⁰ For example, the doctrine of reincarnation, so essential to the religious traditions of India (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism), is conspicuously absent from the so-called Western religions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahá'í). Hick accounts for this difference by noting that it is the literal understanding of reincarnation that divides these traditions. However, if reincarnation is understood as a powerful metaphor, as myth, the differences between these two great religious traditions collapses. In Hick's words:

The doctrine of reincarnation is seen by some as a mythological way of making vivid the moral truth that our actions have inevitable future consequences for good or ill, this being brought home to the imagination by the thought that the agent will personally reap those consequences in a future earthly life.⁸¹

Hick makes similar arguments for the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. Hick contends that all such exclusive sounding religious doctrines are susceptible to being interpreted metaphorically. This being the case, the exclusive character of all such apparent differences that arise from these doctrines would collapse, according to Hick. The allure of such an approach is indeed appealing.

On all of these matters, the Bahá'í concept of religious unity is essentially the same as Hick's.⁸² Indeed, the Bahá'í writings are filled with examples of how such doctrines as reincarnation, or the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, or the claim that Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets, may be metaphorically interpreted in such a way as to lose their exclusive character. In other words, it is the literal interpretation of such doctrines, and not the doctrines themselves that results in the traditionally exclusive tone found in many religious traditions. For example, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of the resurrection of Christ, it is not the doctrine itself that is rejected, but rather the traditional literal interpretation of the resurrection story that is called into question.⁸³ Some might object to this line of reasoning, citing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's and Shoghi Effendi's clear rejection of reincarnation.⁸⁴ Given Hick's mythological interpretation of this and other such doctrines, could it not be argued that it is the literal understanding of such doctrines that is rejected in the Bahá'í writings? Such a theological stance has obvious advantages since it removes, or at least lessens, the exclusive nature of such doctrines while honoring their profound mythological content.

Since it is very similar to Hick's perspectivist view, the Bahá'í principle of religious unity is more appropriately characterized as a type of perspectivism. Bahá'í perspectivism differs from Hick's insofar as his appears to operate in one direction only: from human beings to ultimate reality. The Bahá'í conception, however, operates in both directions: from human beings to the Absolute and from the Absolute to human beings. In other words, not only do human beings have different perspectives of God or ultimate reality but, according to the Bahá'í writings, God or ultimate reality also adapts or accommodates the understanding of Itself to the different historical periods and cultures of the world. Thus, implicit in the Bahá'í principle of religious unity is the concept that religious truth is relative, that divine revelation is uniquely suited and adapted to the age, culture, and stage of human development in which it appears. For example, in referring to the various religions of the world, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that

every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God. Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it hath appeared.⁸⁵

That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.⁸⁶

This concept is hardly unique to Bahá'í theology; similar notions have been advanced by a number of thinkers. For example, in a recent essay, Rabbi Daniel Polish argues that God's revelation is

. . . conditioned by the circumstances and situations of each of the peoples to whom such disclosure was made. The one God is seen as having addressed each people in terms appropriate to that people. The various religious traditions are understood as the records and elaborations of those disclosures, in the languages, forms, symbols and constructs appropriate to each of the groupings of humankind.⁸⁷

To summarize, the Bahá'í principle of religious unity is perspectivism with a twist. The conventional meaning of perspectivism involves various responses to or perspectives of divinity made by the adherents and theologies of the world's religions. However, Bahá'í perspectivism also entails the varying responses of the Absolute to humankind. In other words, a mutual process or hermeneutical circulation exists between religious communities and the Absolute; between the ever-evolving perspectives of divinity and religious truths on the one hand, and the adaptation of those truths by that same source of divinity or ultimate reality to particular societies and traditions on the other. Bahá'í perspectivism incorporates a human–divine interaction similar to what W. C. Smith observes about religious communities the world over:

. . . each of these processes has been and continues to be a divine-human complex. To fail to see the human element in any would be absurd; to fail to see the divine element in any would . . . be obtuse. (To fail to see the interrelatedness of all is, I suggest, old-fashioned.)⁸⁸

The Bahá'í approach to religious pluralism further parts ways with Hick over his assertion that the phenomenon of religion, in all its worldwide diversity, is best understood from a family resemblance model, after the usage of Ludwig Wittgenstein.⁸⁹ In this conception of religion, there are no essential characteristics, no common principles that every religion must have; there is no collective essence, no essential core, no sure foundation upon which all religions either share, agree in principle, or are founded upon. Instead, according to Hick, there is a continuum of characteristics “distributed sporadically and in varying degrees which together distinguish” the family of religious traditions from other families such as political movements or philosophical schools of thought.⁹⁰

In contrast, the Bahá'í view asserts the very things that a family resemblance model would deny: namely, that there are certain essential characteristics that all religions share. In this view, the religions of the world are "as differing species of the same genus," to borrow an insightful analogy from W. C. Smith.⁹¹ For example, under the genus *Felis* falls a wide variety of cats, including both wild and domestic species. Despite differences in size, geographic distribution, and certain behaviors, all cats share many common characteristics such as their predatory behavior, carnivorous diet, and general physical appearance, which includes that most catlike of all features—whiskers—and, as any cat-lover well knows, an appealing aloofness. The world's religious traditions are understood in a similar way. While the religions of the world vary greatly, they share, according to the Bahá'í conception, certain fundamental features including their common origin and their emphasis on the ability of faith to transform an individual profoundly.

With the preceding analogy in mind, it should be clear that the Bahá'í principle of religious unity is best characterized as a type of perspectivism similar to the theory advocated by Hick. Bahá'í perspectivism, does not, however, incorporate, as Hick's does, a family resemblance model. On the contrary, the Bahá'í view clearly holds that behind the seeming diversity of the world's religions there exist certain unifying features that they all have in common. For this reason, as I have already argued, the Bahá'í view also shares certain similarities with the concept of the "transcendent unity of religions," which Schuon so persuasively argues. The Bahá'í view is also similar to what Huston Smith terms the "primordial tradition."⁹² All these views have in common the assertion that behind the seeming diversity of the world's religious traditions lie both a common origin and certain universal truths.

In pulling together the various lines of my argument so far, it is readily apparent that the Bahá'í principle of religious unity is best characterized as a modified inclusivist position that incorporates a perspectivist understanding of religious pluralism. This analysis is not complete, however, for the Bahá'í view also includes, as a basic component, an historical understanding of the world's religions.

THE BAHÁ'Í PRINCIPLE OF RELIGIOUS UNITY AND HISTORICAL PROCESS

"The world is in flux, and we know it," affirms Wilfred Cantwell Smith at the beginning of his thought-provoking book *The Meaning and End of Religion*. It is in this work that Smith persuasively argues for the importance of understanding religion within a dynamic historical context. "Like other aspects of human life," continues Smith, "the religious aspect too is seen to be historical, evolving, in process."⁹³ Thus, for Smith, the religious traditions of the world have been involved in a dynamic process of historical contact and mutual influence.

With the possible exception of Islam, the Bahá'í Faith may be unique among the world's religious traditions in embracing the idea that religion must be understood historically.⁹⁴ Indeed, within the Bahá'í corpus, the religious traditions of the world are not seen as static and isolated events that sporadically appear. Rather, they are seen as participating in a progressive, dynamic, and never-ending process. Smith echoes the Bahá'í view when he argues that the religious traditions of the world should be seen as active "participants in the world history of religion."⁹⁵ Not surprisingly, the Bahá'í conception of religious history is grounded in a process metaphysics. Indeed, in language reminiscent of that found in Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*,⁹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms:

Creation is the expression of motion. Motion is life. A moving object is a living object, whereas that which is motionless and inert is as dead. All created forms are progressive in their planes, or kingdoms of existence, under the stimulus of the power or spirit of life. The universal energy is dynamic. Nothing is stationary in the material world of outer phenomena or in the inner world of intellect and consciousness.⁹⁷

It follows directly from such an understanding of reality that the phenomenon of religion would be subject to the same dynamic process. 'Abdu'l-Bahá thus continues:

Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive. If it be without motion and nonprogressive, it is without the divine life; it is dead. The divine institutes are continuously active and evolutionary; therefore, the revelation of them must be progressive and continuous. All things are subject to reformation.⁹⁸

In a cyclical view, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá likens the story of religion to a process of growth and decline similar to “the progression of the seasons of the year,” with the beginning of each religion comparable to the beginning of spring.⁹⁹ In similar fashion, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh often use the analogy of the rising and setting of the sun when explaining this concept.¹⁰⁰ The point of these and similar references, too numerous to mention, is this: the Bahá’í Faith regards the religions of the world as participants in a dynamic, cyclical, and progressively unfolding process, what Bahá’ís call “progressive revelation.”¹⁰¹ This process both stimulates human civilization and keeps pace with it.

Following from the main lines of my argument, I can now reasonably substantiate the Bahá’í position that the religions of the world are to be regarded as participants in the successive unfoldment of the “ancient path of God” in which the Bahá’í Faith is only one of the most recent participants and, by its own admission, not the final participant. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi points out that the Bahá’í Faith recognizes the religions of the world “as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part.”¹⁰²

The concept of progressive revelation provides the final factor for the analysis of the Bahá’í concept of religious unity. Since the religions of the world have been successively revealed to an ever-advancing human civilization, many of the apparent differences between these religions are due to historical and cultural factors. In other words, the religious traditions of the world differ because the historical and cultural conditions have differed. Given this understanding, any discussion of religious pluralism would have to take the changing historical and cultural conditions into account, which is precisely what the Bahá’í principle of religious unity does.

DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVISM

In attempting to synthesize the various strands that comprise the Bahá’í principle of religious unity as elaborated above, it becomes apparent that no existing label or categorization is adequate. Bahá’í doctrine combines elements of perspectivism and transcendent unity, while situating the various religious traditions within an unfolding and progressive historical process (i.e., “progressive revelation”). For these reasons, I have designated the Bahá’í doctrine of religious unity

a “dynamic perspectivism.” Hopefully, such a designation will help to clarify the various misconceptions of the Bahá'í principle that a simplistic use of the current terminology perpetuates.

CHALLENGES TO THE BAHÁ'Í PRINCIPLE OF RELIGIOUS UNITY

The greatest philosophical challenge to the Bahá'í principle of religious unity originates from the diverse group of current trends in philosophy and literary criticism that fall under the general heading of post-modernism. Radical pluralism may be seen as one such trend in the post-modern movement. When radical pluralists focus their attention on religion, they hold that even after one employs the kind of perspectivism advocated by the Bahá'í Faith, there remain “irreducible aspects,” “mutually incommensurable insights,” and stubbornly different doctrines and worldviews in every religious tradition that cannot simply be reduced to some “monolithic unity,” intellectual abstraction, or ultimate reality.¹⁰³ As I have previously argued, the Bahá'í writings do not claim that all the religions are the same. Important differences are in fact acknowledged. For instance, the Christian doctrine of incarnation and the corresponding Hindu concept of the *avatara* are rejected, together with all pantheistic and anthropomorphic conceptions of the Divine.¹⁰⁴ What radical pluralists and others argue is that such differences are either largely ignored, viewed as relatively unimportant secondary or nonessential aspects, or worse, that such differences represent corrupt degenerations from some supposed pure or essential core of truth.¹⁰⁵ Others, including many adherents of a deconstructive approach, go even further and deny the validity of any and all ultimate truths or the existence of some one absolute reality, ultimate being, or universal spirit. They reject what the French literary critic and founder of deconstruction Jacques Derrida terms the Western tradition of “onto-theology” or “foundationalism.”¹⁰⁶

Obviously, whether an ultimate truth exists or not, or whether truth is unitary or pluralistic, or whether differences are to be privileged or treated as secondary characteristics, are questions not open to proof either through the appeal to empirical evidence or conclusive arguments. Each view has gathered around it certain lines of reasoning which support its own perspective. It is clear to many that those who favor one view over the other do so not on the basis of any indisputable line of reasoning. Rather they do so on the basis of certain

presuppositions that bias them in one direction or the other. As Huston Smith simply puts it, "Everything turns on which foot one comes down on."¹⁰⁷ Consequently, this debate is, at least partly, a matter of emphasis. To be more specific, on the one hand, for those who emphasize differences, diversity is granted a privileged position and any unitary features are seen as less important or superficial. On the other hand, for those who presuppose the existence of some underlying universal truth, unitary principles are given a privileged position, while any differences that may be encountered are considered secondary or nonessential. Such considerations call to mind the classical Greek debate over "the one and the many."¹⁰⁸

This debate may have less to do with meaningful philosophical issues and more to do with the tension that exists between what Schuon calls the esoteric and exoteric dimensions found within each religious tradition.¹⁰⁹ Schuon identifies the esoteric dimension as the inherently more mystical of the two, since it is characterized by a monistic realization of an inclusive, absolute, undifferentiated unity, or supreme identity that can only be spoken of through symbols and myths, allegories and metaphors. Accordingly, it is at the esoteric level that the concept of the unity of religions is realized. According to Schuon, while this realization is potentially available in any tradition or culture, only a small minority of people in any given tradition ever achieve it. In contrast, the exoteric dimension is concerned with doctrines and dogmas, outward forms, logical proofs, and concrete images. The exoteric level is characterized by a monotheistic or dualistic exclusivism that recognizes as correct one concrete form or expression over others. At the exoteric level, for example, Islam is proclaimed to be the only true religion. It is at this level that the world's religions are perceived to be both bewilderingly diverse and mutually exclusive.

Schuon sees the esoteric and exoteric dimensions as embodied in two distinct personality types found within all religious traditions, with the majority of religious adherents being exoteric. This is very similar to T. Patrick Burke's discussion of the "popular" or "devotional" (exoteric) and "reflective" (esoteric) aspects of religion.¹¹⁰ Like Schuon, Burke argues that the reflective (esoteric) personality type has more in common with its counterparts in other religious traditions than its shared commonality with those within its own tradition. The same is true for the devotional (exoteric) personality. In other words, these distinctions cut across religions traditions.

Given Schuon's distinction, radical pluralism seems to belong more to the exoteric dimension, while views that advance religious unity belong more to the esoteric dimension. Since, for Schuon, these two dimensions of religion represent deeply felt approaches to religious life, it is doubtful whether the debate between radical pluralism and perspectivist views will ever be resolved. In its favor, the Bahá'í unity paradigm, what I have characterized as a dynamic perspectivism, does have the advantage of fostering, at least among Bahá'ís, a deep appreciation and love for the world's religious traditions. Bahá'u'lláh encourages his followers to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship."¹¹¹ This attitude follows directly from the Bahá'í doctrine of religious unity, for the adherents of the world's religious traditions are one's brothers and sisters in an ancient and progressively unfolding process of which the Bahá'í Faith is only the most recent, and certainly not the last, development.

I close with Huston Smith's conclusion from his own defense of primordialism, remarks that apply likewise to what I have called the dynamic perspectivism of the Bahá'í Faith:

Some thinkers are so occupied with these differences that they dismiss claims of commonality as simply sloppy thinking, yet identity *within* difference is as common an experience as life affords. Green is not blue, yet both are light. A gold watch is not a gold ring, but both are gold. Women are not men, but both are human. . . . Blue is not red, but both are light. Exoterics can be likened to people who hold that light isn't truly such, or at least that it is not light in its purest form, unless it is of a given hue. Meanwhile academicians have become so fearful that a hue will be overlooked or that some that are known will become victimized—marginalized is the going word—that they deny the existence of light itself. There is nothing that hues instance and embody; nothing, in deconstructionist language, that texts signify. All that exists is an endless stream of signifiers.

The primordialist believes there is such a thing as light in itself—pure white light that summarizes all the wave-lengths—and that it is the Light of the World.¹¹²

Smith's closing sentence echoes the words of Bahá'u'lláh when, in referring to the religions of the world, he proclaims:

These principles and laws, these firmly established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.¹¹³

NOTES

1. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) p. 119.

2. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters from Shoghi Effendi* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) p. 39. Hans Küng echoes this idea when he writes: "There will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions." (Hans Küng, with Heinz Bechert, Josef van Ess, and Heinrich von Stietencron, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*. Trans. Peter Heinegg [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986] p. 443)

3. *Lawh-i Maqsúd*, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i Aqdas*. Comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice. Trans. Habib Taherzadeh and a committee at the Bahá'í World Centre (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) p. 168.

4. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) p. 127.

5. *Promised Day is Come*, p. v.

6. John Hick notes that the principle of religious unity, whether inclusivistic or pluralistic is found "within each of the world's religions, although not as central themes." ("Religious Pluralism," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 12, p. 331)

7. William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) pp. 81–84.

8. Udo Schaefer, *Beyond the Clash of Religions: The Emergence of a New Paradigm* (Prague: Zero Palm Press, 1995). Schaefer's book consists of two extended essays: "Time of the End or a New Era?" and "On the Diversity and Unity of Religions."

9. In *Some Answered Questions* 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "Buddha also established a new religion . . ." and ". . . The founder of Buddhism was a wonderful soul. He established the Oneness of God . . ." (Comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981] p. 165). Obviously the modern nontheistic interpretation of Buddhism would be at odds with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion that Buddha established the oneness of God.

10. For example, see Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) pp. 80, 158; Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 22, 87, 205; and Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950) p. 40.

11. Todd Lawson, letter to the author, May 28, 1992.

12. H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Krammers, eds., "Dín" and "Milla", *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islám*, 1953.

13. F. Buhl and C. E. Bosworth, "Milla," *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1990. The word *milla*, as far as I know, is not used in the Bahá'í writings.

14. From two letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individual believers, dated July 28, 1936 and July 13, 1938, in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 1, #s 54 and 55, pp. 19–20.

15. In reference to the "Confucianists," 'Abdu'l-Bahá attests that "Confucius renewed morals and ancient virtues . . ."; however, he goes on to argue that the beliefs and rites of the Confucianists have diverged greatly from the fundamental teachings of Confucius (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 165). In the so-called "Tablet of Purity," 'Abdu'l-Bahá, while not mentioning the Sikhs by name, commends them as a community of people "far and away superior to others" due to their strict avoidance of alcohol, opium, and tobacco, as well as for their strength, courage, health, and physical beauty. (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh and a committee at the Bahá'í World Centre [Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978], p. 150) In *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares the Native American Indians of today with the seventh-century pre-Islamic Arabs who, when inspired by the teachings of Muhammad, illumined the whole world." (rev. ed. [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1977] pp. 32–33)

16. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, October 28, 1949, in *Lights of Guidance*, #1375, p. 415.

17. For a thorough analysis of the identity of the Sabians, see Christopher Buck's essay "The Identity of the Sabi'un: An Historical Quest," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 74 (July–October, 1984) pp. 172–86.

18. Gibb, and Krammers, eds. *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, p. 477.

19. Buck undertakes an extensive analysis of these and other groups in "Identity of the Sabi'un."

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 178–86.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

22. Barrett, David B. "World Religious Statistics," *1996 Britannica Book of the Year*, p. 298. See Fadil-i Mazandarani's *Amr va Khalq*, Vol. 2, pp. 45–46 for one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's references to the tribal religions.

23. The Bahá'í concept of the "manifestation" of God is not one of divine incarnation (Ar. *hulul*, lit. "indwelling") where the essence of God descends into human form like the Christian concept of Christ or that of the *avatara* in the Vaishnavite tradition of Hinduism. Rather, the Bahá'í theology likens the manifestation of God to a perfectly polished mirror which reflects or manifests the attributes of God. Thus, in such a view, God remains utterly transcendent, above ascent or descent, incarnation or indwelling, while the Manifestation of God is understood as a unique human being capable of reflecting a perfect image of the attributes of God. Juan Ricardo Cole designates such a theology a *theophanology* or "manifestation theology" in his essay "The Concept of

Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings" (*Bahá'í Studies*, No. 9 [Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1982]). J. A. McLean further elaborates Bahá'í manifestation theology in his essay "Prolegomena to a Bahá'í Theology." (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 5, no. 1 [1992], pp. 25–67)

24. Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989) p. 318.

25. *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 5, no. 3 (1993) pp. 17–40.

26. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 43.

27. *Jesus in the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 40.

These twenty-eight prophets include Adam, Abraham, David, Elijah, Elisha, Enoch or Esdras? (Idras) Ezekiel, Ezra, Hud, Isaiah (?) Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Jesus, Job, John the Baptist, Jonah, Joseph, Lot, Luqman, Moses, Muhammad, Noah, Salih, Shu'ayb, Solomon, and Zachariah. The Bahá'í writings also include the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, the Buddha, Confucius, Daniel, Jeremiah, Joel, Joshua, Krishna, and Zarathustra.

28. All quranic quotations are taken from 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's translation *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, rev. ed. 1934; (reprinted Brentwood, MD: Amana Corp., 1989).

29. Glasse, *Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, p. 318.

30. Excerpt from the *Dalá'il-i Sab'ih*, in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh and a committee at the Bahá'í World Centre (Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976) p. 125.

31. *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 58.

32. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) p. 454.

33. *Paris Talks*, 11th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972) p. 53.

34. The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 139 and Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 13.

35. *Kitáb-i Íqán*, p. 153.

36. *The Kitáb-i Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) p. 32, #35.

37. *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984). Schuon's phrase "transcendent unity" appears occasionally throughout the English translations of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. See, for instance, *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) pp. 89, 192–93, 307, and 334.

38. *Transcendent Unity*, p. 17.

39. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952) pp. 117–18.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

41. *The Fragile Universe* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979) pp. 40, 57.

42. *Gleanings*, pp. 79–80, #34.

43. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 168–69, emphasis added.

44. *Paris Talks*, pp. 120–21.

45. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, pp. 92, 82.

46. The Bahá'í writings include among these virtues such traits as mercy, compassion, equity, trustworthiness, wisdom, knowledge (including scientific knowledge) courtesy, and kindness. So important is the acquisition of these virtues that when 'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked in Paris, "What is the purpose of our lives?" he responded, "To acquire virtues." (*Paris Talks*, p. 177)

47. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1989) p. 316. Hick devotes the entire eighteenth chapter to demonstrating the universality of this point.

48. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 151.

49. *Towards a World Theology*, pp. 4–5.

50. *Primitive Mythology*, Vol. 1 of *The Masks of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969) p. 32.

51. *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956) p. 264.

52. For a comprehensive discussion of the importance of spiritual transformation and the acquisition of virtues within the Bahá'í tradition see Jack McLean's *Dimensions in Spirituality* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995).

53. *Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, p. 187.

54. *Excerpts from the Writings of the Guardian on the Bahá'í Life*, comp. the Universal House of Justice (N.c.: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, n. d.) pp. 18, 10, and *Lights of Guidance*, p. 418, #1139.

55. *Excerpts*, p. 12.

56. Letter dated 8 December 1935 to an individual believer, in *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, #1762, p. 238, emphasis added.

57. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, September 6, 1946, in *Lights of Guidance*, #1701, p. 505.

58. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, September 30, 1949, in *Lights of Guidance*, #1159, p. 345.

59. Quoted in Vivekananda, *Ramakrishna and His Message* (Howra, India: Swami Adhayananda, 1971) p. 25.

60. For a full account of this analogy, see Ronald Eyer's illuminating discussion in his book *Ronald Eyer on the Long Search: His Own Account of a Three-Year Journey* (Cleveland: William Collins, 1979) pp. 275–76.

61. *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) pp. 36–37.

62. *Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna*, compiled by Swami Abhedananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975) p. 248, #686 and p. 251, #694.

63. *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: New American, 1963) p. 168.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 51ff.

65. "Christianity in the Wider Context: Demands and Transformations," *Religion and Intellectual Life*, Vol. 4, no. 4 (Summer 1987) pp. 9 and 8.

66. Mark Jurgensmeyer, Review of *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. Harold G. Coward (State University of New York Press, 1987) in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 56, no. 4 (Winter, 1988) p. 773. In this review, Jurgensmeyer notes that in "the recently revised version of Claude Welch and John Dillenberger's *Protestant Christianity*, the authors have added a new concluding chapter describing what they regard as the most significant new trend in Protestant thought: theologies of religious pluralism."

67. *Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 170.

68. "Religious Pluralism," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 12, pp. 331. In his book *Towards a World Theology*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith similarly writes: "Religious diversity is a problem within, as well as among, [religious] communities." (p. 23)

69. "Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge" in *Religious Pluralism*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) p. 98. I have modified Panikkar's list by giving his six options a name after the usage of John Hick, Paul Knitter, and others.

70. J. A. McLean, "Prolegomena to a Bahá'í Theology," pp. 53–57.

71. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 58.

72. *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow: A Selection from the Writings of Shoghi Effendi* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1953) p. 118.

73. *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 115. The italicized portion of this passage is a quotation from Bahá'u'lláh found in the *Kitáb-i Íqán*, p. 137.

74. *Living Religions*, 2d. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994) p. 386 and *The World's Religions: A Completely Revised and Updated Edition of the Religions of Man* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991) p. 385.

75. Quoted in Pritam Singh, "The Scriptures of Different Faiths," in *God, His Mediator, and Man* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1958) p. 14; emphasis added. This and other such scriptural references predate the recent scholarly approaches to religious pluralism as well as the formal definitions of religious exclusivism and inclusivism.

76. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i Aqdas*, p. 85, #182.

77. See "Part Four: Religious Pluralism" in *An Interpretation of Religion*. Hick also discusses perspectivism in Chapter 3 of his *Problems of Religious Pluralism* and Chapter 3 of *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 240ff. Armed with this distinction Hick contends that the various understandings of ultimate reality propounded by the religions of the world are not incommensurate views but differing perspectives of the same reality. Moojan Momen has previously discussed the similarity between

Hick's view and the Bahá'í position. See "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics," in *Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, Vol. 5 (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988) pp. 207–208.

79. *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 36–37.

80. See Chapter 19 of *An Interpretation of Religion*.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 349. Hick cites a number of Buddhists who hold this view, including such notable thinkers as the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani (p. 376, note 9).

82. For example, many of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations of apparently exclusive religious concepts depend on metaphorical interpretations. See, for instance, *Some Answered Questions*.

83. *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 103–106.

84. Some Bahá'ís might challenge the metaphorical or mythical view of reincarnation by holding to the stricter theological interpretation based on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation that the belief in reincarnation is erroneous. For references to reincarnation, see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 282–88, and Shoghi Effendi's interpretations in *Lights of Guidance*, ns. 1820, p. 536 and 1826, p. 538.

85. *Gleanings*, p. 81, #34.

86. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 13.

87. "Understanding Religious Pluralism," *Religion and Intellectual Life*, Vol 4, no. 4 (Summer 1987) p. 56.

88. *Towards a World Theology*, p. 34.

89. *An interpretation of Religion*, pp. 3ff. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963). Hick points out that the term "cluster concepts" is a synonymous term.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

91. *Towards a World Theology*, p. 52.

92. See Smith's article "Philosophy, Theology, and the Primordial Claim," *Cross Currents*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (Fall 1988) pp. 276–88 and Chapter 3 of his *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

93. P. 2.

94. I stress here the idea of the religious tradition itself, rather than the work of scholars. One of the central foci of *Religionswissenschaft* is to view religion historically.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

96. Bergson is considered the founder of process philosophy, an early 20th-century movement in philosophy that also claims such thinkers as Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and Teilhard de Chardin.

97. From a public lecture given at the Free Religious Association, Boston, Mass., May 24, 1912, in *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 140.

98. *Ibid.*

99. Ibid., pp. 126–27, from a talk given at the Church of the Divine Paternity, New York City, May 19, 1912.

100. The Báb, *Persian Bayan* 4:12, in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 106; Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i Íqán*, pp. 21–22, 160–61.

101. For the specific occurrence of the phrase “progressive revelation,” see Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 74–75, #31. In this same passage, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the world's religions as links in a “chain of successive revelations.” In *Towards a World Theology*, W. C. Smith suggests that the image of a flowing river may help communicate the dynamic and fluid process in which the world's religions are involved. (p. 26)

102. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 114.

103. This initial definition is largely taken from Raimundo Panikkar's essay “Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge.”

104. For references to the rejection of the incarnation doctrine, see Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 49, #20, Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 112–13, and *Lights of Guidance*, #1699, p. 504. For similar references on anthropomorphism and pantheism, see two letters written on behalf of the Shoghi Effendi, dated April 21, 1939 and October 26, 1932, in *Lights of Guidance*, #1574, p. 477 and #1583, p. 479.

105. Cultural anthropologist Michael Fischer makes an argument typical of this type of criticism in his analysis of the Bahá'í community of Yazd in “Social Change and the Mirrors of Tradition: The Bahá'ís of Yazd” in Heshmat Moayyad, ed. *The Bahá'í Faith and Islam*, Proceedings of a Symposium, McGill University, March 23–25, 1984 (Ottawa, Canada: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1990) pp. 25–55.

106. See Purusottama Bilimoria, “A Problem for Radical (onto-theos) Pluralism,” *Sophia*, Vol. 30, no. 1 (1991) pp. 21–33. For a well-written evaluation of Derrida's views, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) especially Chapter 2. For works by Derrida, see *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) and *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

107. *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, p. 35.

108. See Plato's *Parmenides* or Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book X, Chapter 3.

109. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, chapters 2 and 3.

110. *The Fragile Universe* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979) pp. 79–92.

111. *Lawh-i Dunya*, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 87.

112. *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, p. 35; and “Philosophy, Theology, and the Primordial Claim,” p. 288.

113. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 13.