

Switching the Reference: Bahá'í Life and Existential Philosophy

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Abstract¹

This paper presents a particular interpretation of the dynamics of Bahá'í life through a correlation to modern, existential theism. Here the terms existential theism and theistic existentialism are used interchangeably. This correlation seeks to compare the spirituality of “living the life” (Shoghi Effendi, letter, 2 February 1925)² with some of the basic concepts of existentialism, a philosophy that engages with the human condition, not as a mere theoretical construct, but as a lived experience, (*le vécu*) or *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life). This presentation focuses especially on the spiritual self (*nafs*) engaged in the search for truth, which is synonymous with the search for God/Truth/Reality (*al Haqq*). In addition to these points, this paper will elucidate: (1) the role of passion in the search for truth. (2) the place of existence and essence in living-in-the-world. (3) the existential moment and the epiphanic moment, singular experiences of spiritual crisis and divine disclosure respectively. (4) return to a belief in the soul: overcoming estrangement from self and God. (5) existential themes in Bahá'í sacred history. (6) Bahá'u'lláh's narrative theology of the self. The intellectual considerations of the individual's spiritual existence are fundamental and inescapable “categories” of the Bahá'í religion and will contribute to the needed diversification of Bahá'í theology.

INTRODUCTION: THE CURRENT STATE AND REQUIREMENTS OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

Dr. Seena Fazel, the Oxford psychiatrist, has determined that the scope, availability and number of academic publications in Bahá'í studies has increased significantly in the past 30 years (to 2008). Using citation analysis, Fazel notes that the intervening years have witnessed a greater output, especially in Middle Eastern studies and Bahá'í history, which he identifies as “the most prominent subjects in academic Bahá'í studies.”(Fazel, “Contemporary developments in Bahá'í studies: an examination using citation analysis”, <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/bhpapers/vol7/trends.htm>).³ However, certain areas still require development. Dr. Stephen Lambden observed in 1994 that “Being philosophically informed is particularly important for Bahá'ís who are in dialogue with persons concerned with ethical, epistemological, theological and metaphysical issues. Too few Bahá'ís have to date grappled with this complicated but vital area.” (Lambden, “Doing Bahá'í Scholarship in the 1990's”).⁴

Further to Lambden's observation, the treatment of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá has called “the

discovery of the verities of life” (*Promulgation* 365)⁵ and ‘ilm-i vújúdí (the knowledge of being/existence) (*Some Answered Questions* 157)⁶ has thus far been lacking in Bahá’í scholarship. By neglecting the concrete life of the individual, the theoretical, academic or scholastic approach to Bahá’í studies runs the risk of becoming identified with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s pointed critique of religion as being reduced to “the noise, the clamor, the hollowness of religious doctrine.”⁷ (*The Bahá’í World* 2:xvi).

The following statement of Shoghi Effendi is the *ne plus ultra* on the necessity of exemplifying Bahá’í spirituality in daily life. While his statement underscores the dynamic power of personal example in validating the Bahá’í Revelation, it also points to the individual as one of the fundamental categories of the Bahá’í religion. This category of the individual is validated in the present paper:

Not by the force of numbers, not by the mere exposition of a set of new and noble principles, not by an organized campaign of teaching -- no matter how worldwide and elaborate in its character -- not even by the staunchness of our faith or the exaltation of our enthusiasm, can we ultimately hope to vindicate in the eyes of a critical and skeptical age the supreme claim of the Abhá Revelation. One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendour of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh. (*Bahá’í Administration* 66)

THE DIVERSE ROOTS OF EXISTENTIALISM LIE IN THE HUMAN CONDITION

The various strands of existentialism are too diverse to be labelled a “school of thought.”⁸ Existentialism is rather a style, mood or mode which has found wide expression in philosophy, theology, literature and psychology. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the father of existentialism, whether theistic or atheistic, coined the term “existentialist.” Existentialism has deep roots that can be traced back to the Greek myths of estrangement and loss. According to the respected theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), a basic existentialist theme is found in Plato’s allegory of the cave in which the human being finds herself estranged from the knowledge of the true self which Plato equated with the contemplation of the Form of the Good: “But Plato’s existentialism appears in his myth of the human soul in prison, of coming down from the world of essences into the body which is its prison, and then being liberated from the cave” (*Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology* 101).

The biblical roots of existentialism are even more ancient. They are found in the Genesis allegory of the exile of humanity’s original parents from the garden of Eden. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpretation of this myth (*mythos*, sacred story), the sin of Adam and Eve, traditionally interpreted as the breaking of a divine command, was prompted by the dictates of self, symbolized by the serpent, signifying attachment to the human rather than the divine world. (*Some Answered*

Questions 123-24)⁹ This tendency or action resulted in an estrangement from self and is dramatically represented as exile from Eden (Gen. 3:23-24). Existential moods are also found in Pascal, St. Augustine (Kierkegaard adopted St. Augustine), the Psalmist, Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job.

The metaphysical existentialism of Sartre, Jaspers and Heidegger are not modes of reflection but serious philosophies. In theology, some of the prominent theistic existentialists are Gabriel Marcel, Berdyaev, Buber, Brunner, Tillich, and at the antipodes of one another, Bultmann and Barth.¹⁰ In literature, Walter Kaufmann hears in *Dostoevsky's Notes From Underground* (1864) the first tones of the strident voices of individualism that were to be heard later in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. The literary existentialism of such writers such as Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus and Sartre tends to be dark and pessimistic about human motives and the ability of the individual to overcome psychological conflict and to live happily in the world. This literature is to be contrasted with the more positive interpersonal relations of Heidegger's *Besorgen/Fürsorge* (concern/solicitude)(Qtd by Macquarrie in *Existentialism* 107)¹¹ and Buber's "I-Thou," his philosophy of dialogue and personal being based on *Begegnung* (encounter), or Gabriel Marcel's "*métaphysique de l'espoir*" (metaphysic of hope).

In psychology and psychiatry Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) and Médard Boss (1903-1990) founded a school of existential psychiatry and psychology which has a strong philosophical flavour. Its keynote is self-determination: if the individual so chooses, she may transcend the limitations of the body, personal history and physical environment. The individual may choose to find meaning in suffering and so empower herself. This approach has influenced such popular writers as Rollo May, Eric Fromm, and Viktor Frankl.

TWELVE BASIC CONCEPTS OF THEISTIC EXISTENTIALISM

The following twelve concepts may be attributed to theistic existentialism.¹² We should keep in mind how these twelve themes may relate to the Bahá'í teaching on the self, the search for truth, living the life, and spiritual crisis.(1) Generally, philosophy avoids life. This is untenable. A philosophy of life must find its place in Bahá'í intellectual discourse. (2) Human existence cannot be fully grasped rationally. Constructing closed, logical systems, as in traditional philosophy, is not the most effective way to find truth and experience spiritual transformation. (3) We must distinguish, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá did, between subjective and objective knowledge: "Knowledge is of two kinds. One is subjective and the other objective knowledge -- that is to say, an intuitive knowledge and a knowledge derived from perception." (*Some Answered Questions* 157)¹³ While science, common sense and logic may deduce certain objective truths, the whole person must be involved in the search for truth. Hence Kierkegaard's famous dictum: "Truth is subjectivity," probably originally formulated as "...the subject is in the truth." (*Concluding Unscientific*

Postscript 178). (4) The spiritual self is an agent for self-and-world-change, not merely a passive, analyzing, thinking subject as in Descartes. The self finds and fulfils itself in action as well as introspection. (5) The irrational or emotional elements of existence, quantities such as hope, faith, joy, sorrow, despair, alienation, suffering, salvation, finitude and death, which are not treated in traditional philosophy, find a valid place in existential writing. All these aspects of the human condition are given place in Bahá'í scripture. (6) Existentialists do not propose a neat, monolithic set of solutions to intellectual problems. Rather, they propose that the seeker engage in a "spiritual struggle" (David Roberts, *Existentialism and Religious Belief* 5) of soul-work to accomplish the transformation of self. The main purpose of religion, as Bahá'u'lláh affirmed, is spiritual transformation which is but another word for "authenticity," one of Heidegger's preferred words. With Bahá'u'lláh, it is a question, not only of individual but also collective transformation: "And yet, is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? (*Kitáb-i-Iqán* 240) (7) The knowledge of self is a process, a moving spiral, not a steady state to be once and forever captured; not a finality but a becoming. Kierkegaard wrote that "An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming. and translates all his thinking into terms of process." (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 79)¹⁴ This is consonant with the Bahá'í writings which view spiritual progress as ongoing and open-ended. (8) The human being is an ambiguous, paradoxical or contradictory creature. He stands midpoint between darkness and light. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "Therefore, we say that man is a reality which stands between light and darkness. From this standpoint his nature is threefold: animal, human and divine. The animal nature is darkness; the heavenly is light in light." (*Promulgation* 465). (9) While the human being has certain inescapable limitations, she remains nonetheless creative and free. She must use her spiritual freedom to overcome the bondage of the animal nature, and to perfect the divine nature, or as 'Abdu'l-Bahá put it, to strive to be released from "the prison of self." (Qtd. by Lady Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway* 166)¹⁵ (10) Existential theism is a protest against narrow rationalism, conformity, impersonality, tyranny, legalism and mass-mindedness. (11) While prophetic religion offers sure guidance for the problems and perplexities of the human condition, the individual must learn to apply this wisdom. This learning is a heuristic, experimental process and cannot be achieved by anyone else. The existential believer is engaged in an independent search for truth for which she is personally responsible. (12) Existential theism is not perforce anti-social, not locked in isolated self-centredness, as is sometimes supposed. It embraces the communion of all authentic souls in community life. Despite its emphasis on the individual, existentialism reveals "...the fundamentally communal character of existence." (Macquarrie, *Existentialism* 118). Its integration of self means integration of and with the community. Its individual transformation is coterminous with collective transformation, as the quotation from Bahá'u'lláh cited above shows.

THE SEARCH FOR SELF AS THE SEARCH FOR GOD

Bahá'u'lláh underscored the vital necessity of self-knowledge when He wrote: “True loss is for him whose days have been spent in utter ignorance of his self.”(*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 156). The converse of this dictum must also be true: if we gain knowledge of true self, we gain great good. According to Shoghi Effendi—paradoxically--the more an individual seeks herself, the less will she find herself. It is above all the search for God that enables the seeker to find self. Shoghi Effendi wrote through his secretary: “The more we search for ourselves, the less likely we are to find ourselves; and the more we search for God, and to serve our fellow-men, the more profoundly will we become acquainted with ourselves, and the more inwardly assured. This is one of the great spiritual laws of life.” (*Lights of Guidance* 114). This precept is consistent with Bahá'u'lláh's quotation of Muhammad's hadith: “He hath known God who hath known himself.”(*Kitáb-i-Iqán* 101). According to Shoghi Effendi:

...self has really two meanings, or is used in two senses, in the Bahá'í writings; one is self, the identity of the individual created by God. This is the self mentioned in such passages as ‘he hath known God who hath known himself etc.’ The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. It is this self we must struggle against, or this side of our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain perfection.(Letter, 10 December 1947, *Lights of Guidance* 421).

Bahá'u'lláh referred, of course, to these understandings of the higher and lower natures of the self, which, it is important to note, are not two separates selves, but one self, governed by two opposing tendencies. Of the self's higher plane, He wrote in *The Four Valleys*: “On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned.” (*The Four Valleys* 50). The knowledge of self must lead to *praxis*, which in Aristotle's sense of the word, refers to conduct or goal-oriented, intentional action. (Blackburn, “Praxis” *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*)¹⁶. As *savoir-faire* or “know-how,” the knowledge of self transcends purely objective knowledge which is the knowledge of things, whereas the knowledge of self is the knowledge of being. When self-knowledge is translated into action, it becomes the perfect synthesis of “knowledge, volition and action,”(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 157)¹⁷ and constitutes great gain for the individual.

Now the search for truth is meaningless without the seeker. The seeker is the necessary concomitant of the search for truth, which ‘Abdu'l-Bahá has called “the first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh”(*Promulgation* 62)¹⁸ and Shoghi Effendi a “primary duty,” (“A World Religion: The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh” 9)¹⁹ a duty which does not cease after one's Bahá'í affiliation. Without the seeker, the immense force field of truth would remain mere abstraction: ethical and spiritual values would never be practiced. The major, postliberal²⁰ American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), who applied the Christian revelation to engaged, this-worldly, social and cultural ethics, has pointed to the transcendent quality of the self in knowing both the world and itself: “The self knows

the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world.”(Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* 1:14). The truth is not, consequently, an objective body of knowledge waiting to be discovered “outside” the transcendent self. In one vital sense, the seeker *is* the truth since she is both subject and object of the search. He who finds God, finds himself and he who finds himself finds God.

PASSION AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

As already mentioned, in the Bahá’í Faith, truth-seeking and the search for self is God-seeking. In the epistemology contained in His preeminent doctrinal work, the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, Bahá’u’lláh makes spiritual passion *de rigueur* in the search for God:

Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker’s heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubt and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being. (*Kitáb-i-Iqán* 195-6).

Kierkegaard also made passion a positive element in the search for truth, for it alone could confer certainty: “The conclusions of passion are the only reliable ones,” he said in a memorable phrase, and another statement that well applies to the state of truth-seeking today: “What our age lacks is not reflection but passion.”(*Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* 1:180). Spiritual passion leaves no stone unturned. Even a desperate search is preferable to the way of negative detachment, for detachment without its converse, positive attachment to the Divine Will, lacks sincerity, one of the key ingredients in faith. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá closely tied sincerity to faith: “Sincerity is the foundation-stone of faith” (*The Secret of Divine Civilization* 96).

Nietzsche in *The Gay Science (Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft)* speaks of an age in which “preparatory men” will “carry heroism into the pursuit of knowledge”...²¹ Like Bahá’u’lláh and like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche had understood that “lovers of knowledge” had to pursue knowledge with daring and a sense of adventure. This daring was eloquently expressed in the following passage:

...men characterised by cheerfulness, patience, unpretentiousness, and contempt for all great vanities...Soon the age will be past when you could be satisfied to live like shy deer, hidden in the woods! At long last the pursuit of knowledge will reach out for its due: it will want to *rule* and *own*, and you with it!...For, believe me, the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to *live dangerously!* Build your cities under Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves! Be robbers and conquerors, as long as you cannot be rulers and owners, you lovers of

knowledge!(Qtd. by Kaufmann [ref] 127)²²

LIVING-IN-THE-WORLD:²³ EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE

The existential frame of reference is the life of the solitary individual living in the world, a world into which, as Heidegger said, we have been *geworfen*—thrown. The spatial metaphor of being thrown into the world indicates that humans feel like strangers to their existence. Existentialists hold that being, or more concretely, life itself (*Existenz*), rather than the world of the idea or essence should become the object of reflection. Sartre says, for example: “What they [existentialists] have in common is simply the fact that they believe *existence* comes before *essence*--or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective”(*Existentialism is a Humanism*, qtd. by Kaufmann 348). Sartre, a representative of atheistic humanism,²⁴ was simply repeating with this assertion what Kierkegaard had observed years before in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) on the relationship between existence and essence:

That essential knowledge is essentially related to existence does not mean the above mentioned identity which abstract thought postulates between thought and being; nor does it signify, objectively, that knowledge corresponds to something existent as its object. But it means that knowledge has a relationship to the knower, who is essentially an existing individual, and that for this reason all essential knowledge is essentially related to existence. Only ethical and ethico-religious knowledge has an essential relationship to the existence of the knower. (77)²⁵

For Sartre, this existence could be no other than human existence, *viz.* existence devoid of the Divine: “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism” (*Existentialism*, qtd. by Kaufmann 349). Both theism and atheism, however, share this personal responsibility: “For the faith of no man can be conditioned by any one except himself” (*Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* 143). But even atheists accept that “faith” has an inescapable place in the life of the individual, if one accepts Tillich’s existential definition of faith as being in the state of “ultimate concern,” which is the state of being infinitely, unconditionally and totally concerned. In Tillich’s existentialist-essentialist theology, this ultimate concern was the quest for the Ultimate Unconditioned, i.e. the ground of being, one of Tillich’s definitions for God. (*Systematic Theology* 1:11-12)²⁶ Bahá’í theology gives a large place to the spiritual essences that are the names and attributes of God (*asmá va sífát-i-illáhí*); so it is not a question of either existence or essence. Both figure into the Bahá’í worldview.

The necessary connection between philosophy and life as *Lebensphilosophie* is what lies behind Ludwig Feuerbach’s remark: “Do not wish to be a philosopher in contrast to being a man...do not think as a thinker...think as a living, real being. think *in* existence.”(*Grundsätze der*

Philosophie der Zukunft (Basic Propositions for the Philosophy of the Future) 78)²⁷ Feuerbach seems to be saying that life itself provides the *materia bruta* for philosophy. This is suggested by his phrase “think *in* existence.” Ancient philosophy, moreover, originated in deeper and systematic reflections upon life’s common experiences and the human being’s relationship to the social order.²⁸ Neither philosophy, even less theology, can be a flight from the quotidian. The “concrete situation,” according to the Jewish, existential theologian Martin Buber (1878-1965) must be willingly embraced:

But he will not remove himself from the concrete situation as it actually is; he will, instead, enter into it, even if in the form of fighting against it. Whether field of work or field of battle, he accepts the place in which he is placed. He knows no floating of the spirit above concrete reality; to him even the sublimest spirituality is an illusion if it is not bound to the situation. Only the spirit which is bound to the situation is prized by him as bound to the *Pneuma*, the spirit of God (*Eclipse of God* 37-8).

The life of the solitary individual is in Heidegger’s word *Dasein*, literally, “being there,” which suggests an openness, availability or sensitivity to embrace the unfolding world around us. Gabriel Marcel’s more hopeful word for the same attitude was “disponibilité” (availability) which “...connotes openness, abandonment of self, welcoming. The man of hope remains open to the “absolute recourse” –he does not despair in the face of life’s negativities.”(Livingstone, *Modern Christian Thought From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* 355). Existential theism, then, does not ignore or deny the malaise of the spiritual subject who may feel alienated from the world.

THE EXISTENTIAL MOMENT: SPIRITUAL CRISIS

The encounter with the Divine, self, other or significant event takes place in two forms: the existential moment and the epiphanic moment.(J.A. McLean, *Under the Divine Lote Tree* 115-16).²⁹ The existential moment is an apocalyptic moment of spiritual crisis. It is a sudden meeting characterised by unpredictability or surprise. The existential moment is accompanied by harrowing psychological states: surprise, shock, confusion, grief, betrayal, anger, anxiety, despair, or in Kierkegaard’s phrase “fear and trembling”.³⁰ In its ultimate form, as the crucifixion of Jesus, or Peter’s denial of Christ, the existential moment brings “the sickness unto death.”³¹

The spiritual crisis generated by the existential moment is a moment of stark realism that suddenly removes the seeker from everyday concerns or the realm of the ideal. If, for example, we have just been told by a surgeon that we have inoperable cancer, our current project suddenly pales into insignificance. If we have just been told that the life of a loved one hangs in the balance, our present preoccupations are no longer significant. This is the existential moment.

The existential moment, however, is ripe with possibilities. In this context, it is worth noting that the Chinese word for “crisis” consists of two characters: one means danger, the other opportunity. This Chinese word reflects a profound spiritual truth that corresponds to the existential moment. It is a moment in which the fate of the believer’s spiritual development stands to make great gain or significant loss. Although the individual may perceive the existential moment as a threat, as an alien—in Buber’s terms as an unwanted It—if she is able to detach and listen closely, the voice of the eternal Thou will be heard speaking through. She will hear the voice of the Beloved who seeks union with her. If she accepts the moment of spiritual crisis as opportunity, she will experience “Nothing save that which profiteth them can befall my loved ones.”(Bahá’u’lláh, qtd. by Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* 82).

In the existential moment, the believer must face the lower self, either in oneself or others, which Shoghi Effendi tells us can develop into “a monster of selfishness.”(*Lights of Guidance* 386:113). If we have known the higher self as described in the first valley of *The Four Valleys* (*Cháhár Vadî*) as “On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned.”(*The Four Valleys* 50), in the existential moment, we encounter rather the self as “O QUINTESSENCE OF PASSION,” or “O REBELLIOUS ONES,” or “O CHILDREN OF FANCY,” or “O WEED THAT SPRINGETH OUT OF THE DUST”. (Nos. 50, 65, 67, 68, Persian *Hidden Words*). The existential moment, then, is a meeting with the the spiritual self that is being called to peel away the mask of the elemental self to allow the face of the true believer to emerge. In this “life test,”³² one is brought face to face with one’s own finitude, moral weakness or powerlessness to control and direct the other person or event. In this existential moment, the believer is faced with an unpredictable, threatening or hostile event or world --a world perceived as an impersonal It, but which the believer may potentially experience as a Thou.

THE EPIPHANIC MOMENT: DIVINE DISCLOSURE

Also apocalyptic, and contrasting with the existential moment, the epiphanic moment³³ is an experience of exaltation, illumination or triumph when the soul is possessed by awe or celebration, or in the phrase of C.S. Lewis, is “surprised by joy,” the title of C.S.Lewis’s spiritual autobiography.³⁴ This epiphanic moment is, in Mircea Eliade’s word, a hierophany,³⁵ a numinous manifestation of glory or celebration. It may be a divine healing, a mystic encounter, or winning the desires of the heart. Its apotheosis is Bahá’u’lláh in the Garden of Ridván,³⁶ and all the lesser reflections of that Divine Event.

The epiphanic moment is a meeting of an “I” with a “Thou,” a highly personal encounter. Buber wrote that “...every genuine religious experience has an open or a hidden personal character, for it is spoken out of a concrete situation in which the person takes part as a person”.(*Eclipse of God* 37). This perspective views the universe as a dialogue with a “Thou,” a “Thou” which Buber

expounded as the act of *Begegnung* (meeting/encounter): “All real living is meeting”(I and Thou 11). In all the spiritual events that significantly impact upon the soul, one finds the encounter of a greater “Thou” with a lesser “thou,” the meeting of a greater Personal Being who speaks to a lesser personal being. Buber wrote: “In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the eternal Thou; in each we are aware of the breath from the eternal Thou; in each Thou we address the eternal Thou”(I and Thou 6).

RETURN TO THE SOUL: OVERCOMING ESTRANGMENT FROM GOD AND SELF

Existentialist writers like Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, Sartre—and Nietzsche could be included in this list--have depicted modernity’s alienation of the self from itself and others. The tragedy and pathos of the spiritual condition of moderns is that they are alienated, not only from others, but more importantly, from their own soul. This alienation represents a profound failure in self-understanding as a diminished reflection of the “Self of God” (nafs-i-illáhí),³⁷ a failure which has given rise to the angst and meaninglessness that prevails in postmodernity. The individual feels lost in a meaningless world because he is not anchored to the core of his spiritual being. He feels anxiety because ignorance of the spiritual self produces a disquieting sense of loss and alienation that is perceived as a threat to his existence. It is precisely because of this dislocation that the believer seeks to live by a system of values in which the soul may feel at home, or as soteriology would say it--saved, whole (salvus) or free. Tillich’s reference cited above to Plato’s teaching of liberation from the cave and the prison of the body is one of the basic meanings of salvation.

Predictably, the false gospel of scientism has had something to do with human self-estrangement. From the middle of the 20th to the beginning of the 21st centuries, some scientists such as Desmond Morris, Richard Dawkins, Jacques Monod, to name but a few, have been leading an aggressive campaign against belief in God and all that such a foundational belief entails. The result of the spread of this materialistic ideology has been to eliminate teleology and purpose from creation. In such a scientific worldview, moral absolutes have been eliminated. What morality does remain has been reduced to biology and the cunning of “smart genes.”

It naturally follows from such a campaign that belief in the rational soul, as a special divine creation, possessed of unique dignity, freedom and immortality, has also been eclipsed. Keith Ward, author of the critically acclaimed *God, Chance and Necessity* (1996), has cogently argued in *In Defence of the Soul* (1992) for a return to the belief in this foundational divine reality. He writes:

There is little that is more important in our culture than to reaffirm the existence of the soul and to show the shallowness of views denying it. For the most important thing in life, in the end, is to discover what we truly are and to live accordingly. If we are souls, created by God

to know and love Him for ever, nothing could be more important for us to realize than that. The battle for the soul is real. What is at stake is the human freedom and dignity, morality and truth, the survival of human beings as moral and responsible beings (168-9).

Unlike atheistic existentialism, theistic existentialism gives place to a “theology of hope,”³⁸ acceptance and self-determination, rather than pessimism and despair. The French existentialist Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) sees the closest of connections between a belief in the soul and the virtue of hope:

I spoke of the soul. This word, so long discredited, should here be given its priority once more. We cannot help seeing that there is the closest of connections between the soul and hope. I almost think that hope is for the soul what breathing is for the living organism. Where hope is lacking the soul dries up and withers, it is no more than a function, it is merely fit to serve as an object of study to a psychology that can never register anything but its location or absence. It is precisely the soul that is the traveller; it is of the soul and of the soul alone that we can say with supreme truth that “being” necessarily means “being on the way” (*en route*).(*Homo Viator* 10-11)³⁹

Like Gabriel Marcel, the great Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye (1912-1991), conceives of the “deeper existential problem” of hope as going beyond the “intellectualized problem of faith and doubt.” Hope, Frye writes, makes fiction possible: “Here the virtue is hope rather than faith, and the opposite of hope is not doubt but despair...Job goes through the depths of despair. It is because he does so that the hope is sustained at the end...hope is simply the will to believe the impossible, and without its basis in fiction or illusion, there could be no such virtue ”(Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths* 207).

To counteract the fear, despair, alienation and meaninglessness that pervade contemporary society, theistic existentialism relies on a full store of spiritual values that may be applied to counteract the “emptiness” which Rollo May characterised as the “chief problem of people in the middle decade of the twentieth century,”(*Man’s Search for Himself* 14)⁴⁰ an emptiness that has only intensified in the opening decade of the new millennium. High on this values list is the metaphysical belief in the soul as the reality of man and a theology of hope.

G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) wrote eloquently about his own sense of homelessness while living-in-the-world and the profound psychological adjustment of acceptance that brought release:

The Christian optimism is based on the fact that we do *not* fit in to the world. I had tried to be happy by telling myself that man is an animal, like any other which sought its meat from God...The modern philosopher told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the

wrong place, and my soul sang for joy, like a bird in spring...I knew now why grass has always seemed to me as queer as the green beard of a giant, and why I could feel homesick at home.(*The World Treasury of Modern Religious Thought* 385)⁴¹

EXISTENTIAL THEMES IN BAHÁ'Í SACRED HISTORY (*HEILSGESCHICHTE*)

Bahá'í sacred/salvation history is the documentation and interpretation of events associated with the Bahá'í dispensation. But just as importantly, it is a history that revolves around the lives of Three Central Figures who are the objects of deep reverence and devotion. The words and events associated with the lives of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are of great import, not only to determine the exact nature of these words and events, but also to inspire the believers who are their followers. For one thing, the lives of the Three Central Figures have direct relevance for a spirituality of adversity, and a search for meaning for moderns living in a “strangely disordered world,”⁴² as Shoghi Effendi calls it, a phrase which sounds an existentialist ring. The missions of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá were carried out amid constant persecution, privation, adversity and hardship, making the spirituality exemplified in their lives profoundly authentic, i.e. credible.

The Báb's martyrdom, Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's imprisonment and exile, whether it was the imposed exile of the sovereign's decree, or Bahá'u'lláh's voluntary withdrawal into the mountains of Sulaymáníyyih in Kurdistan, afford an opportunity for the seeker to discover how she may also find meaning in situations of loss and adversity and to face conflict, alienation, disappointment, loneliness and hardship courageously. By examining their response to conditions of banishment and persecution, the believer is able to better understand, accept and overcome feelings of personal “exile.” In this perspective, Bahá'í history cannot be reduced simply to the detached reification of historical events. It serves, rather, to ground and orient the practice of an authentic spirituality.

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S NARRATIVE THEOLOGY⁴³ OF THE SELF IN *THE FOUR VALLEYS* AND *THE SEVEN VALLEYS*

Two pointed examples of finding God and self are narrated by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Seven Valleys* (*Haft Vádí*) and *The Four Valleys* (*Cháhár Vádí*). Both theological narratives, which are based on Rúmi's *Mathnaví*, present the loss and recovery of self as the soul's encounter with God. Northrop Frye wrote that the theme of the estrangement from self and its recovery is the grand theme of all of literature: “The story of the loss and regaining of identity, is, I think, the framework of all literature...”(*The Educated Imagination* 21)⁴⁴ Frye includes, of course, in his definition of literature, biblical literature whose mytho-poetic themes and structures he has creatively analyzed in remarkable vision and detail.⁴⁵ Frye's definition clearly applies to the theological narratives

presented by Bahá'u'lláh.

The first story, which is based on Rúmi's famous tale of the learned grammarian and the unlettered boatman (*The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, Book I) tells of the journey of the mystic knower ('*aref*) and the grammarian in the first valley of *The Four Valleys*. Both travellers come to the "Sea of Grandeur," a metonym and metaphor for God. ⁴⁶Bahá'u'lláh recounts:

The story is told of a mystic knower, who went on a journey with a learned grammarian as his companion. They came to the shore of the Sea of Grandeur. The knower straightway flung himself into the waves, but the grammarian stood lost in his reasonings, which were as words that are written on water. The knower called out to him, "Why dost thou not follow?" The grammarian answered, "O Brother, I dare not advance. I must needs go back again." Then the knower cried, "Forget what thou didst read in the books of Sibavayh and Qawlavayh, of Ibn-i-Hájib and Ibn-i-Málik, and cross the water." (*The Four Valleys* 51)

Bahá'u'lláh then quotes from the *Mathnaví*: "The death of self is needed here, not rhetoric/Be nothing, then, and walk upon the waves"(52). This Sufi tale contains a number of existential elements. The wholehearted commitment to the life of faith, personified by the mystic knower, is very reminiscent of the Abraham who is presented by Kierkegaard as the courageous "knight of faith" (*Fear and Trembling* 89-90).⁴⁷ The mystic knower makes the "leap of faith" (*Springet*) (Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* 98), a concept Kierkegaard had modified from Lessing,⁴⁸ and walks across the water. He stands in marked contrast to the hesitant, rationalist grammarian. One of the symbolic meanings of walking on the water is the death of self (*faná*), or overcoming one's lower nature, for to walk upon water is not only to defy nature but to overcome it. Bahá'u'lláh's tale implies, moreover, a strong critique of the powers of reason to connect the seeker with God which is also a favourite theme of Kierkegaard.

The grammarian's dependence upon his books was in reality a desire to return to the familiar, theoretical, logical forms of knowledge on which he relied, whereas the mystic knower's experience of God lay clearly in *le vécu*, the lived experience that transported him into action by "the leap of faith," the direct translation of his professed beliefs into live action. In this parable, the heroic self of the true believer emerges as the '*aref*' casts behind him the despair and doubt that are left in reason's wake. By taking this "leap of faith," the mystic knower defies the dictates of reason that command the protection and preservation of self. But instead of sinking beneath the waves, he defies gravity and walks on water.

One notes the dramatic turnaround, the sudden "great reversal".⁴⁹ Instead of *falling* from grace, as did Adam and Eve, the mystic knower *rises*. The spatial metaphor of the leap underscores the powers that accrue when the believer dares to renounce fear and trust in God. Walking on water is a particularly effective metaphor here for it creates space, or decenters the self, and thereby intensifies the sense of the liberation of the spiritual wayfarer.

The other story, retold by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Seven Valleys*, is also borrowed from Rúmi's *Mathnáví* (Book II 265-76).⁵⁰ This story of the lost lover refound, the bereaved Majnún who suddenly finds his beloved Laylí in a garden enclosure, is one of the brightest gems in all spiritual literature. This allegory is in one respect the complement and fulfilment of the Genesis myth of Adam and Eve which 'Abdu'l-Bahá has interpreted as an allegory of the bondage of the human soul to the material world ("Adam and Eve", *Some Answered Questions* 122-26).⁵¹ In Bahá'u'lláh's version, which also takes place in a garden in the Middle East, the Genesis cycle comes full circle: the exiles return to the garden and recover the paradise of love they once knew. Majnún's reunion with Laylí symbolizes the triumph of bliss over despair in the joy of the soul's sudden and unexpected reunion with God. In another sense, this reunion can be viewed as the soul's complete internal integration once it discovers its true identity which results in the overcoming of its own disunity.

Despite its classical status, the distinct modernity of Bahá'u'lláh's version of Rúmi's tale is not lost on the reader. The most distressing elements portrayed by existentialist writers are present: acute pain, loneliness, depression, alienation, and most significantly, the denial of love, the frustration of the most cherished desire of the heart. Bahá'u'lláh has Majnún being driven beyond the nadir of despair to the very edge of madness where he contemplates suicide: "Then one night he could live no more, and he went out of his house and made for the market-place."(*The Seven Valleys* 13)⁵² But then comes the surprise reversal of the dramatic *dénouement*.

Bahá'u'lláh's purpose in presenting Majnún's acute distress is hopeful and spiritually therapeutic. Intense suffering turns out to be the prelude to finding the heart's desire and its accompanying healing and integration. Unlike Majnún's reunion with Laylí, the characters in atheistic, existentialist literature remain trapped in the morass of their neurotic, separative, disturbed states of mind. Bahá'u'lláh's allegory of the lost lover refound even contains Sartre's notion of *Huit Clos*, no exit. Majnún is hemmed in by the watchmen who symbolize the conspiring forces of evil. Unlike Sartre, however, Bahá'u'lláh provides a door of hope. His allegory of the lover (the soul) finding its true beloved (God) comes in a high paradox. The bereaved Majnún believed himself to be lost, whereas he was, in fact, saved.

CONCLUSION

One inescapable dimension of Bahá'í scripture and sacred history is the interpenetrative meanings of the self, the search for truth and God as integral features of the Bahá'í life. Bahá'í theology may be interpreted so as to legitimize the theistic elements of existentialism by elucidating the merits of spiritual struggle in the search for and the discovery of Truth/God/Reality/Self. In this process, moments of spiritual crisis become potential opportunities for divine disclosure and spiritual transformation which aid in overcoming estrangement from self, God and others. This existential

perspective also restores belief in the immortal soul as the reality of man. The elucidation of existential theism will diversify the field of Bahá'í studies by switching the frame of reference from theoretical to practical questions, i.e. "living the life," which is an inescapable and fundamental requirement of the Bahá'í religion. This diversification allows the voice of the engaged religious thinker or spiritual philosopher to speak and to round off the more objective analysis of the clinical academic.

NOTES

¹. This paper is a modified and expanded version of a presentation made to Ian Kluge's Philosophy Special Interest Group at the Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, San Diego, California, 29 August-1 September, 2008.

². Scores of passages exist on this theme in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the interpretations of Shoghi Effendi. For example: "The great thing is to 'Live the Life' -- to have our lives so saturated with the Divine teaching and the Bahá'í Spirit that people cannot fail to see a joy, a power, a love, a purity, a radiance, an efficiency in our character and work that will distinguish us from worldly-minded people and make people wonder what is the secret of this new life in us." *Lights of Guidance* 376: 111.

³. Dr. Fazel's article covers the years 1997-2001 and compares them with the previous two decades. Fazel notes that the Internet has provided for greater availability of Bahá'í primary and secondary sources, and that the number of published academic monographs and bibliographic sources has increased, despite certain setbacks.

⁴. Lambden cites Robert Parry's article "Philosophical Theology and Bahá'í Scholarship" in the *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* as an instructive paper in this area.

⁵. In His discussion of the bipolar nature of religion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá identified as one pole the moral or ethical pole and "social laws and regulations applicable to human conduct as the other pole: "One concerns the world of morality and the ethical training of human nature. It is directed to the advancement of the world of humanity in general; it reveals and inculcates the knowledge of God *and makes possible the discovery of the verities of life*. This is ideal and spiritual teaching, the essential quality of divine religion, and not subject to change or transformation. It is the one foundation of all the religions of God. Therefore, the religions are essentially one and the same." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 365) (emphasis mine).

⁶. For the expression *'ilm-i vújúdí* see, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of "The Knowledge

of the Divine Manifestations” in *Some Answered Questions* 157. Juan Ricardo Cole has alluded to a resemblance between ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *‘ilm-i vújúdí* with that of Plotinus’s primal intellect in the *Enneads*, V. 3:2 and a similar notion in Avicenna, *De Anima* 248-49. See “The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá’í Writings,” n. 149, 35.

⁷. The full sentence reads: “Wherefore it is incumbent upon all Bahá’ís to ponder this very delicate and vital matter in their hearts, that, unlike other religions, they may not content themselves with the noise, the clamour, the hollowness of religious doctrine.” From a passage translated by Shoghi Effendi in *The Bahá’í World*.

⁸.Existentialism lacks, for example, that mark of all schools, a recognizable system for analyzing questions. There is no common discourse or set of principles that may be applied to all existential approaches. In this respect, one could say that the existentialists prefigured the postmoderns with their decidedly anti-systematic bias. Moreover, existentialist writers and thinkers sometimes draw diametrically opposed conclusions

⁹. “The meaning of the serpent is attachment to the human world. This attachment of the spirit to the human world led the soul and spirit of Adam from the world of freedom to the world of bondage and caused Him to turn from the Kingdom of Unity to the human world. When the soul and spirit of Adam entered the human world, He came out from the paradise of freedom and fell into the world of bondage. From the height of purity and absolute goodness, He entered into the world of good and evil.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 123-24.

¹⁰. Although Karl Barth’s prodigious *Church Dogmatics* (12 volumes and 7,000 pages) and his *Theology of the Word* identify him as neo-orthodox, there are nonetheless existential dimensions to Barth’s work. Barth was aware that revelation, the vertical line of transcendence and eternity, intersected the horizontal line of human existence in time. This meeting of time and eternity was paradoxical. Despite his dialectics, and against the dogmatician and the mystic, Barth believed that the knowledge of God is never immediate. Against Barth’s work which seemed to some to be too rigid and traditionalist, Bultmann based his theology on technical biblical criticism and an existential dimension based on the early work of Heidegger. Some interpreted Bultmann’s theology as being too anthropocentric, even non-theological.

¹¹.From *Being and Time*, quoted by Macquarrie. In context, Heidegger was also preoccupied with the meaning of anxiety.

¹². From John Maquarrie’s *Existentialism* (1972) and David E. Roberts’s *Existentialism and Religious Belief* (1959). These themes are filtered through a Bahá’í perspective.

¹³.While the subject of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talk is “The Knowledge of the Divine Manifestations,” it

is clear that his distinction applies to ordinary human beings since he says that "...the knowledge of being (*'ilm-i vujúdí*), is intuitive; it is like the cognizance and consciousness that man has of himself." *Some Answered Questions* 157.

¹⁴. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is usually regarded as the work that represents the point of view that objective reasoning is of little or no use in the life of religious faith.

¹⁵. "When one is released from the prison of self, that is indeed freedom!" Quoted from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's famous statement to the American Bahá'ís, following His release after the revolution of the Young Turks (1908). "Freedom is not a matter of place, but of condition, etc."

¹⁶. In Aristotle's philosophy *praxis* was to be distinguished from *theoria* and *poiésis* (skilled handicrafts).

¹⁷. "The attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. Unless these three conditions are forthcoming, there is no execution or accomplishment."

¹⁸. Either the challenging nature of the meaning of "truth" or the deceptive simplicity of this teaching has caused it to suffer a certain scholarly neglect. For a further discussion on the search for truth see chapter one, "The Starting Point: The Search for Truth" in J.A. McLean, *Dimensions in Spirituality: Reflections on the Meaning of Spirituality and Transformation in Light of the Bahá'í Faith*. See also Gary L. Matthews' instructive article "The Searching Eye" in *Bahá'í News* 2-9. In his talks in North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá consistently places the search for truth first in his sequential presentations of Bahá'í teachings. See, for example, his talks in Washington, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, Boston, Montreal, Sacramento, and on two occasions in New York, and also in his long exposé of Bahá'í teachings in Paris.

¹⁹. The complete quotation is: "It [the Bahá'í Faith] moreover, enjoins upon *its followers* the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth." This quotation is particularly noteworthy because of the italicized words. The search for truth is not just for those who are seeking truth in their pre-Bahá'í stage. The duty of the search continues in the post-Bahá'í stage. Shoghi Effendi, "A World Religion. The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh" a summary statement of the origin, teachings and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith prepared in 1947 for the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine 9 (emphasis mine).

²⁰. In the United States, the mid-20th century school of postliberal theology originated at Union Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School where Reinhold Niebuhr (Union) and his equally famous brother H. Richard Niebuhr (Yale) taught. It is not to be confused with the late 20th century school of the same name which is a proponent of narrative theology. Originating at Yale and Duke Divinity Schools, it includes George Lindbeck, Hans Wilhelm Frei and Stanley

Hauerwas.

²¹. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* quoted in Kaufmann 127.

²². Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* quoted in Kaufmann 127. I take it that Nietzsche's bold and militant tropes are intended to shock the "lovers of knowledge" out of complacency and to leave no stone unturned in the search for truth.

²³. Living-in-the world is an alternate translation of being-in-the-world which renders Heidegger's *Dasein*, his word for human existence, literally, "being there" as distinguished from *Sein* (Being). Heidegger has himself explained the meaning of *Dasein* in the introductory key sentence of *Being and Time* with this somewhat obscure statement: "*Das "Wesen" des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz*" ("The essence of being there (*Dasein*) lies in its existence").

²⁴. Sartre declares "Atheistic existentialism , of which I am a representative...". *Existentialism is a Humanism* 349, qtd. by Kaufmann.

²⁵. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* 77.

²⁶. In *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich clarified that this ultimate concern means that the human mind or spirit participates in the Ground of its own being. In this way, the separative, subject-object, God-man dichotomy is overcome.

²⁷. In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach's reduced God or divine transcendence to anthropology (God is man), to a mere projection of human self-consciousness. Feuerbach was one of the Left Wing or "Young Hegelians" who used Hegel but stood him on his head. For Hegel, man was God in his self-alienation. For Feuerbach, God is man in his self-alienation.

²⁸. The very early roots of Greek philosophy lie in Hesiod. After his poetic, mythological *Theogony* (eighth century BCE), which treated cosmology or the world order in light of the activities of the gods, Hesiod wrote *Works and Days*, also in poetry, in which man, rather than the gods, occupies the central stage. John Mansley Robinson writes that "He is concerned with man as such, in his relations to the social order, to the gods, and to the necessities of life" (*An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* 3). Robinson writes that Aristotle had named Thales as the founder of Greek philosophy but states that it is unlikely that Aristotle had a first hand knowledge of Thales's views. Robinson views rather Anaximander, a younger contemporary of Thales, as the founder of Greek philosophy (23).

²⁹. The "existential moment" and the "epiphanic moment" are both treated in my book of *pensées* and short essays, *Under the Divine Lote Tree: Essays and Reflections*.

³⁰. From the title of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard considered these books from the esthetic point of view to be "the most perfect" books that he had ever written. Translator's note, 18. One can certainly agree with Kierkegaard since the prose in these books is free of that strain and passion that is so characteristic of much of his other writing. A simplicity and a philosophical lucidity is found in these works.

³¹. *The Sickness Unto Death* remains to this day the preeminent study in the psychology of despair and heavily influenced the thinking of the existentialists who followed Kierkegaard, particularly Heidegger and Sartre. Kierkegaard explains that the sickness unto death is despair. Since death would mean the end of despair, he argues that "...the torment of despair is precisely this, not to be able to die. So it has much in common with the situation of the moribund when lies and struggles with death, and cannot die. So to be sick unto death is, not to be able to die---yet not as though there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness in this case is that even the last hope, death, is not available" (150-151). From the title of Søren Kierkegaard's, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death*. *The Sickness Unto Death* is a later, more mature version of the earlier *Fear and Trembling* (1843).

³². A phrase I have used in *Dimensions in Spirituality* to describe a test of exceptional severity. See Chapter 5, "A Paradigm of Spirituality and Life Tests" 128-58.

³³. From the Greek *epiphainomenon*, meaning "to appear" or "to manifest."

³⁴. In this book, C.S. Lewis describes his conversion from atheism to Christianity. The title, however, does not describe his actual conversion experience which was as he has specified "not to Christianity" but to theism (184) and which he has described as "strangely unemotional" (179), for it was a conversion to the realisation of free choice. Riding on top of a bus in Oxford, "going up Headington Hill," Lewis felt himself to be entrapped in a suit of armour or a kind of "corslet." Lewis became acutely conscious at that moment that he had been given the free choice either to keep this armour on or unbuckle it and go free. He was given the freedom to choose, but he did not seem to be able to do otherwise than to choose God. "Then came the repercussion on the imaginative level," says Lewis. "I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt...I rather disliked the feeling" (*ibid*).

³⁵. The word "hierophany" comes Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Etymologically, the word breaks down into "hiero" (sacred) and "phainomenon" (manifestation or appearance). Eliade defines a hierophany this way: "To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term hierophany. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us." ... "In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act--the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to

our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world” (11).

³⁶. Robert Hayden has poetically captured this moment in “Bahá’u’lláh in the Garden of Ridwan” in *Selected Poems*.

³⁷. The Self of God, according to Juan Cole, would seem to refer to the totality of God’s names and attributes as manifested by God’s Divine Manifestation or Prophet. Cole writes that the Self of God “seems to refer to the totality of God’s active attributes, of which the prophets and messengers are manifestations” (*Concept of the Manifestation* 18). Speaking of the attribute of divine justice, Bahá’u’lláh revealed : “Know verily that the essence of justice and the source thereof are both embodied in the ordinances prescribed by Him Who is the Manifestation of the Self of God amongst men, if ye be of them that recognize this truth.” Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* 174.

³⁸. In the Christian tradition, see for example, Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theologie der Hoffnung*, an eschatological study of Christianity in the light of history. English translation by James W. Leitch , *Theology of Hope. On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*

³⁹. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator* 10-11. In his essay, “Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope” (*une métaphysique de l’espoir*), Marcel further develops his metaphysic of hope. See especially 49-67.

⁴⁰. Rollo May, *Man’s Search for Himself*, p. 14..

⁴¹.From Chesterton’s essay *Orthodoxy* in *The World Treasury of Modern Religious Thought*, 389-90. Religious studies scholar Jarsolav Pelikan comments in his introduction to Chesterton’s extract from *Orthodoxy* that although Chesterton “was not a scholar or a theologian but a journalist and the author of the popular Father Brown detective stories” that nevertheless “in books on Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas, “and in two interconnected works entitled *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*, he defended the integrity of the theological tradition with a vigor that many professional theologians and scholars could (and did) envy.” (*The World Treasury of Modern Religious Thought* 385).

⁴². See *The Advent of Divine Justice* 22 and *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 32.

⁴³. Narrative theology is a late 20th century influential theological development which cuts across several subdisciplines such as hermeneutics, biblical literary criticism, social ethics, pastoral and liturgical studies. It includes studies by theologians in all the major Christian denominations and Jewish theologians as well. In its broadest lines, and as its name suggests, narrative theology proposes the use of narrative instead of a set of propositions to rethink the nature, task and method of theology. See George Stroup’s “Theology or Narrative Theology?: A Response to

Why Narrative?” <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jan1991/v47-4criticscorner.htm> and Maarten Wisse’s “Narrative Theology and the Use of the Bible in Systematic Theology” <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000226/article.htm>

⁴⁴. Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, p. 21.

⁴⁵. In such works as *Fearful Symmetry*, *Anatomy of Criticism*, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, *Words With Power: Being a Second Study of The Bible and Literature*, *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*.

⁴⁶. Metonymy is the naming of a thing by one of its parts.

⁴⁷. *Fear and Trembling* excogitates upon Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. It contests the Hegelian notion of a system or science of universals or absolutes by a juxtaposition and contrast of the individual, represented by Abraham, who chooses to violate a universal ethical norm (infanticide) which requires the sacrifice of his beloved offspring. Kierkegaard says: “The knight of faith is obliged to rely upon himself alone, he feels the pain of not being able to make himself intelligible to others, but he feels no vain desire to guide others” (p. 90). “The true knight of faith is always absolute isolation, the false knight is sectarian” (p. 89).

⁴⁸. Kierkegaard acknowledged his debt to Lessing in his elaboration of the leap. See Kierkegaard's *Papirer* V. B 1, 3, p. 53. For Lessing and Kierkegaard truth meant religious truth. The accidental or contingent nature of historical truth presented a gap that had to be overcome with the leap that manifests the “unconditional certainly required by religious faith.” Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* 98.

⁴⁹. The “the great reversal,” is synonymous with *vav va makousé* (*the reversed vav*) which occurs in the writings of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá’í (1753-1826 CE), founder of the Shaykhí school of Islam. Al-Ahsá’í interpreted the inverted or reversed Arabic letter *wáw* when written out in full (*wáw-alif-wáw*) as a sign of the advent of the promised Qá’im. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (§ 157) Bahá’u’lláh also writes: “Behold, the “mystery of the Great Reversal in the Sign of the Sovereign” hath now been made manifest.” With these words Bahá’u’lláh alludes to his own coming as fulfillment of prophecy. The great reversal refers more specifically to the eschatological phenomenon of the inversion of spiritual status between clergy and laity at the advent of the Prophet. See Stephen Lambden's provisional translation and commentary “The Translation and Significance of a Shaykhí Phrase in the “Most Holy Book” (*al-Kitáb al-aqdas*): “The Mystery of the Great Reversal in the Sign of the Sovereign” (*sirr al-tankís li-ramz al-ra’ís*), paper delivered at the Association for Bahá’í Studies, English-Speaking Europe, July 1993. See the *Bahá’í Studies Bulletin* for further details.

⁵⁰. In Nicholson’s translation it is found at the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth *Daftar*.

⁵¹. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that “It [the story of Adam and Eve] contains divine mysteries and universal meanings and it is capable of marvelous explanations.”

⁵².*The Seven Valleys*, p. 13.

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