

Udo Schaefer

# Beyond the Clash of Religions

The Emergence  
of a New Paradigm

Zero Palm Press

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of Religions

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Second revised edition

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To my wife

Sigrun

*curarum laborumque sociae*









## Preface to the Second Edition

This work has been so well received<sup>1</sup> that a second edition has been prepared, providing an opportunity to eliminate a number of errors which had been overlooked in the first. I am deeply indebted to Nancy Ackerman, in Moscow, for polishing the English translation and for making editorial suggestions.

Autumn 1997

U. S.

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1 Cf. The reviews of Loni-Bramson-Lerche, in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* 7.1 (March-June 1995), p. 91ff. and of Christopher Buck in *The Bahā'ī Studies Review*, vol. 6, 1996, pp. 68ff.



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## Preface

### I.

At the heart of Bahā'u'llāh's revelation is a new concept of the history of salvation. Both essays presented in this book are focused on this subject. The first deals with the future of humanity and characterizes *Heilsgeschichte*—the divine Plan of salvation for mankind—as a never-ending process open to the future. The second essay goes on to present the entire history of religion as *Heilsgeschichte*, a continuous process of salvation structured by the epiphanies of the revealed religions.

The first essay, “Time of the End” addresses the apocalyptic perspectives of our civilization and the fears they provoke. It demonstrates why the expectation of the complete annihilation of humanity cannot be justified by reference to the apocalyptic writings of the Bible, and argues that the global upheaval we are witnessing today might rather be interpreted as an epochal turning-point, the beginning of a new era. Consideration is given both to the causes of this crisis faced by mankind and to the new ideas and ways of thinking inspired as a response to it. The final part of the essay presents two contrasting *Heilsangebote* (offers of salvation): the multifaceted New Age movement and the religion founded by Bahā'u'llāh; and makes apparent not only the several superficial features they have in common, but also the cardinal differences.

The second essay, “On the Diversity and Unity of Religions,” examines the phenomenon of the plurality of religions. When there is but one God, why are there different religions? In the past, claims to exclusiveness, finality and uniqueness, made above all by the Semitic religions, have led to isolation, mutual damnation and indescribable sufferings, all inflicted on human beings in the name of religion. Nevertheless, over the centuries in all religions

there have been individuals who rebelled against narrow dogmatism, and raised their voices for a more understanding judgement on other religions. The modern comparative study of religions has greatly contributed to our knowledge about them, whereas in the past their proponents disputed with one another without really knowing their counterparts. Such knowledge is the prerequisite for a dialogue, a dialogue which has begun in recent years, signaling the “slow awakening of global ecumenical consciousness.”\* The “unity of religions” has been made visible by religious phenomenology. As the new paradigm of a progressive, cyclically recurring divine revelation, it has become the pivot of a new theology.\*\*

## II.

A French edition of this book has been published by the Association d'Études Bahā'īe (Europe-francophone) under the title *Histoire du Salut et Changement de Paradigme. Deux Contributions à la Théologie Bahā'īe*, Genève 1993. For this English edition, the original text has been revised and enlarged.

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\* Hans Küng, *Christianity and the Religions of the World*, p. XIV.

\*\* The term “Bahā'ī theology” is used for a methodical, systematic reflection on the Bahā'ī revelation (*scientia fidei*), comprising God who manifests himself, the “Manifestation” (i. e., the prophetology), the Covenant, the image of man (the Bahā'ī anthropology), Bahā'ī ethics, Bahā'ī political thought, social principles etc. God Himself remains an “impenetrable mystery,” an “unknowable essence” (*Gleanings* 26:3). I refer to Robert Parry's “Philosophical Theology in Bahā'ī Scholarship,” in: *Bahā'ī Studies Bulletin* (ed. Stephen Lambden) October 1992, pp. 66ff. and to Jack McLean's highly instructive contribution “Prolegomena to a Bahā'ī Theology,” in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* 5.1, March-June 1992, pp. 25-67, in which he has defined the concept of Bahā'ī theology more closely and argued for its validity as a discipline. He has, moreover, considered the relativity of religious truth in its relationship to the Absolute, discussed aspects of apophatic (negative) and cataphatic (affirmative) theology in relation to the hidden and manifest God, and explored aspects of Bahā'ī cosmology based on Bahā'u'llāh's *Lawḥ-i-Kullu't-Ta'ām* (*The Tablet of All Food*; cf. A. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā'u'llāh*, vol. 1, p. 55-60).

I should like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have contributed to the publication of the English edition. Thanks are due, in particular, to Dr. Geraldine Schuckelt for sacrificing her time to the laborious task of translating the original manuscript and to Mrs. Hélène Momtaz de Neri and Mrs. Susanne Hof for their preliminary work on the translation. I am also very grateful to Mrs. Heidi Grebacher for her careful critical review of the translation and her valuable suggestions; to my publisher, Bonian Golmohammadi, for his advice; and last but not least, to my wife Sigrun for the countless hours she has spent in libraries seeking out the English editions of the works cited and in sitting in front of the computer in order to make this publication ready for print.

As to the quotations from the Writings of the Bāb, Bahā'u'llāh and 'Abdu'l-Bahā: I am following the numbering system introduced by the German Bahā'ī Verlag, which enables the reader to find any quotation in any non-English edition of these sacred texts. The given numbers refer to the paragraph of the respective English/American edition unless a page number is given.

January 1995

U. S.





Time of the End  
or  
A New Era?







## The Survival Crisis

Concepts such as the “time of the end,” the “end of the world,” the “end of history”<sup>1</sup> or the “last days” appear with increasing frequency in a certain genre of literature: that concerned with the current crisis of civilization on our planet. Referring to the global upheavals of our time, physicist and philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker has remarked that “the most clearly evident feature of modern times... is the state of crisis in which we find ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> One has an overwhelming sense of being poised at a decisive point in the history of the world, and of humanity as a whole being on the brink of a catastrophe, its very existence at stake.

Whereas in the mid-1960s futurologists were still predicting a brilliant future in a paradise of wealth and leisure, and in the early 1970s the first ecologists who criticized our economic system with its emphasis on unbridled growth and profit-making were dismissed in both East and West as “scaremongers,” renowned scientists are today themselves forecasting planetary catastrophe on the basis of incontrovertible facts and figures. The widespread use by philosophers, politicians, academics and journalists of the term “apocalypse”—a religious concept that until recently no person mindful of his academic reputation would have uttered seriously<sup>3</sup>—is in itself evidence of the dimension of the threat.

The crisis is total and global: total, because it implicates every aspect of our existence; global, because in an interdependent

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1 Martin Meyer, *Ende der Geschichte?*, München 1993; F. Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” in: *The National Interest*, 16, 1989; Perry Anderson, *Zum Ende der Geschichte*, Berlin 1993; Alexander Demandt, *Endzeit? Die Zukunft der Geschichte*, Berlin 1993.

2 *Wahrnehmung der Neuzeit*, p. 7.

3 The subtitle of Rudolf Bahro’s book *Logik der Rettung* (Stuttgart 1987) is: “Wer kann die Apocalypse aufhalten?” (“Who Can Stop the Apocalypse?”).

world society there are no longer any “empty spaces” and everyone is directly affected. There is nowhere to flee.

The literal meaning of the Greek word *krisis* is “decision” or “turning-point,” and there really is no better word to describe the world situation. For humanity, the crisis is one of survival. After an era of seemingly never-ending scientific and technical triumphs in which human intelligence appeared to conquer all in its path, but at the same time provoke incredible dangers, we have now reached a point at which we are left with only two alternatives: the first is the annihilation of humanity, the end of civilization on this planet, either in a nuclear inferno or more probably through a slow process of decomposition caused by the increasing devastation of the earth and the irreversible damage being wrought upon the ecological system;<sup>4</sup> the second is an about-face, a fundamental transformation of consciousness, attitudes, ethical values and political existence. Is such a transformation still possible, and if so, whence is it to come?

Many voices are already proclaiming that it is too late, that the point of no return has already been reached. The philosopher Günther Anders<sup>5</sup> uses the term “apocalypse blindness” in reference to the consciousness of modern man; like the sorcerer’s apprentice<sup>6</sup> in the famous ballad by Goethe, we have, he says, become prison-

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4 Cf. the discussion of the “Bergedorfer Gesprächskreis” on the subject “The Ecological About-Face – Does it Still Stand a Chance?” (*Protokoll* no. 85, 1988).

5 *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, p. 233.

6 *Der Zauberlehrling*: “A young man apprenticed to a sorcerer decides to try out what he has learned while the sorcerer is absent. He commands a broom to fetch water from a nearby river and to fill the bath inside the house. The broom obeys and soon the bath is filled, but, not knowing the magic word, the apprentice cannot stop the broom. In desperation, he cuts the broom in two using an axe. Now both halves start to bring more and more water, until a flood threatens to engulf the house. Finally, the sorcerer returns and puts an end to the disaster. The story which originates from the Greek satirical author Lucian (circa 120-160 A. D.) and which has been set to music by Paul Dukas (*L’apprenti sorcier*) is perhaps best known to English-speaking readers through the animated film *Fantasia* by Walt Disney, in which the role of the apprentice is played by the cartoon character Mickey Mouse.

ers of our own machinery and material objects, and are unable to escape from this self-imposed captivity.<sup>7</sup> He argues most vigorously that mankind is no longer living in an epoch, but only in the brief period remaining before the ultimate end, the inexorable end of time. Hoimar von Ditfurth regards mankind's chances of survival as "desperately slim."<sup>8</sup> He finds it difficult to understand why "humanity seems determined to surrender to the course of events without showing any resistance, and that it is not even prepared to acknowledge the extent to which it has gone astray."<sup>9</sup> The historian Alexander Demandt regards a tragic end to humanity as "probable if existing problems intensify... One can imagine a state where the inhabitants of the earth regret having missed a nuclear disaster."<sup>10</sup>

The utter disillusionment of all human hopes is reflected in a cynical book: *Das Untier*.<sup>11</sup> This is the term by which its author, Ulrich Horstmann, designates man, whom he perceives only as the personification of his inferior traits—avarice, hatred and destructiveness. According to Horstmann the apocalypse awaits this "monster," thus bringing history to an end in a final catastrophe,

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7 "What Goethe described in poetic form as a horrifying and exceptional occurrence is happening to us all the time...; the broomsticks, which in this parable take on a life of their own, are our technical installations – the power stations, nuclear missiles, space equipment, and the industrial plants required to produce these things; Together these make up our everyday world... Furthermore, these 'spirits' are in the habit of expanding and reproducing... They are becoming more and more independent of human control, and, conversely, are making us ever more dependent on them through their power and autonomy. Since in his story Goethe had the robot work on as a pair of robots after it was split in two, the writer evidently envisaged such accumulation... Whereas in Goethe's work it was a single, enchanted broomstick (and then a pair of broomsticks), we are living today in an ever denser forest of broomsticks. And since there is no way to cut down this forest or to flee from it, this is our world" (*Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 2, pp. 401ff.).

8 *So laßt uns denn ein Apfelbäumchen pflanzen*, p. 7.

9 *Ibid.* p.14.

10 *Endzeit?* pp. 149ff.

11 "The Monster."

removing all traces of its existence, what he calls the “mooning” of the earth.<sup>12</sup>

### The Time of the End—a Biblical Topos

The general mood would appear to suggest that the time of the end is at hand. Is the history of mankind about to terminate? The terms “time of the end,” “last days,” “end of the world,” etc., are references to prophecies made in the Old and New Testaments. According to Christian interpretation, history is moving towards a goal, a final and unique event: the Last Judgement. After a period of suffering, torment and horror, the world will be annihilated in a huge catastrophe. Are the events that we are living through today, and those which are still to come what is meant by this apocalyptic horror? Has the time come?<sup>13</sup>

Anticipation of the “end of the world” is, of course, nothing new. Such expectations<sup>14</sup> have surged repeatedly in times of crisis, especially around the years 1000, 1260 and 1844, years associated with biblical dates and calculations. Whereas in the past it was only the pious who expected the end of the world, while the intellectuals maintained a sceptical attitude, today the talk that is heard about the imminent catastrophe, the “Apocalypse,” comes not from the churches—with the exception of a few Adventist sects—but from scientists and philosophers. Indeed, the destruction of the entire human race was never before technically feasible, and hence as possible, or even probable, as it is today, given the potential of modern technology. Not only man as an individual is mortal: our whole species is under threat of extinction.

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12 *Das Untier*, pp. 7, 113.

13 “*Es ist soweit*” (The Time Has Come) is the subtitle of the book by Hoimar von Ditfurth (cf. footnote 8).

14 for more details see A. Demandt, *Endzeit?*, pp. 23-45.



The Book of Isaiah states that the Lord “maketh the earth empty, and maketh it waste;”<sup>15</sup> that “the earth mourneth and fadeth away;”<sup>16</sup> that “they that dwell therein are desolate;”<sup>17</sup> that “all joy is darkened, the mirth of the land is gone;”<sup>18</sup> that “the earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard;”<sup>19</sup> and that “the inhabitants of the earth are burned and few men left.”<sup>20</sup> However one chooses to interpret these words, it is hard to imagine that this prophecy is not related to the global upheavals and disasters occurring today.

Doomsday, however, is not the last word of the Apocalypse. Beyond all these horrific happenings it foresees “a new heaven and a new earth: wherein dwelleth righteousness;”<sup>21</sup> it promises “the tabernacle of God is among men”<sup>22</sup> who “will be his people;”<sup>23</sup> it announces that God will dry all tears<sup>24</sup> and promises: “Behold, I am making all things new!”<sup>25</sup> These promises clearly indicate a total transformation of man and the world, a new beginning associated with the expectation of the return of the Christ, whatever that is understood to mean. Further evidence in favour of this interpretation is the fact that wherever mention is made in the Gospel of the end of the world,<sup>26</sup> the Greek original uses the term *aion*, a time-concept, rather than the term *kosmos*, as it would have if it meant the end of our existence on the planet Earth.<sup>27</sup>

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15 Isa. 24:1.

16 *Ibid.* 24:4.

17 *Ibid.* 24:6.

18 *Ibid.* 24:11.

19 *Ibid.* 24:20.

20 *Ibid.* 24:6.

21 Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1; II Peter 3:13.

22 Rev. 21:3.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Rev. 21:4.

25 Rev. 21:5.

26 Matt. 24:3; 28:20.

27 The word *aion* is related to the Aramaic *‘olam* (Arabic *‘ālam*), which has been translated by the Jewish scholar Martin Buber as “era,” “age.”

According to the prophecies of the Old Testament, too, the judgement at the time of the apocalypse is not the end of history. Instead, it is a turning-point leading to a universal transformation of human existence in the form of a new covenant of peace embracing all the peoples of the world, enabling them to live thenceforth in a state of permanent peace.<sup>28</sup> Thus, those who assert that the annihilation of the world is inevitable are not justified in referring to the biblical apocalypse in support of their arguments.

For many people there is no doubt that mankind's crisis of survival and the fundamental changes that have been taking place on a global scale over the past hundred years mark a monumental hiatus in the history of the human race. It has been compared to the Neolithic revolution, the transition to the New Stone Age beginning around 6000 B. C., which brought about agriculture and animal husbandry. A transformation of such significance certainly justifies our speaking of it as a new era. The new era which was inaugurated through the birth of Christ is reflected in the fact that events in the new (Christian) calendar were recorded in years as *post christum natum* rather than as in the Roman as *ab urbe condita*. This new era is designated in German by a special term *Zeitwende*, which suggests a far more revolutionary turn of events than its English equivalent and which is not used in any other context. Few would venture to describe the equally revolutionary events of our times as constituting a *Zeitwende*, perhaps because the term is associated with a salvation figure, Christ, and hardly anyone is interested in a new salvation figure.

On the other hand, much use is made of the term "New Age;" indeed, it has become the slogan of a movement claiming the ability to save humanity from the crisis in which it finds itself. Having originated in California, the movement has spread over nearly all of the Western Hemisphere and calls itself New Age. The best

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28 Isa. 2:2ff.; 65:17; 66:22; Ez. 34:25; 37:26; Micah 4:1-4.

known protagonists in the movement are the science-journalist Marilyn Ferguson with her book *The Aquarian Conspiracy*<sup>29</sup> and the physicist Fritjof Capra with his best-seller *The Turning Point*.<sup>30</sup> The latter is an impressive contribution highlighting the recent changes in attitudes evident in physics, biology, medicine and economics. He attributes these changes to a developing new consciousness in twentieth-century science, a consciousness which he describes as mystic.<sup>31</sup> Further terms to signify the dawning of the new age include “the age of Aquarius,”<sup>32</sup> “the solar age”, “the ecological age” and the like. This movement is announcing to an angst-ridden world a time of change in which man, by transforming his consciousness, will abandon his old ways and enter a new state of existence called “cosmic consciousness,” through which all his affairs will be set right again. We shall come back to this subject later.

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29 *Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s*, Los Angeles 1980.

30 *Science, Society and the Rising Culture*, London 1982.

31 *op. cit.*, p. 323. Additional references: Ken Wilber, *Up from Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983; Robert Muller, *New Genesis – Shaping a Global Spirituality*, Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1982; Theodor Roszak, *Unfinished Animal. The Aquarian Frontier and the Evolution of Consciousness*, New York 1977; David Spangler, *Revelation – The Birth of a New Age*, Findhorn Foundation, The Park, Forres/Scotland, 1977; *ibid.*, *Reflections on the Christ*, Findhorn Publications, Findhorn, Moray/Scotland<sup>1</sup>1977; Brockway, Allan R./Rajashekar J. Paul (eds.), *New Religious Movements and the Churches. Report and Papers of a Consultation Sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987; C. E. Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow. The New Age-Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism*, Shreveport 1983; Erich Jantsch, *Die Selbstorganisation des Universums*, München<sup>2</sup>1984; Elmar Gruber, *Was ist New Age? Bewußtseins transformation und neue Spiritualität*, Freiburg 1987; Hans-Jürgen Ruppert, *New Age. Endzeit oder Wendezeit?*, Wiesbaden 1985.

32 The term “Age of Aquarius” is taken from astrology. It is based on Plato’s calculation of the time it takes for the sun to move through all the signs of the zodiac, namely 25,200 years. Approximately 2,100 years are required for each sign. According to these calculations, we are living at a time of transition from the sign of Pisces – the Christian era – to that of Aquarius.

It is not only the protagonists of the New Age movement who perceive the dawning of a new day, however. Scientists and philosophers who are ill-disposed towards mystical speculation, such as Ervin Laszlo, a founder-member of the Club of Rome, also speak of a new age. They recognize that our complex world is approaching a climactic change that will shake the world within our lifetime. Their predictions emanate with stunning clarity from scientific data available today.<sup>33</sup> A new age: herein lies the scientifically justifiable hope that the global crisis need not necessarily culminate in the destruction of humanity and in the end of civilization. On the contrary, periods of bifurcation<sup>34</sup> give mankind the opportunity to influence the otherwise arbitrary fluctuations of social existence, and hence, to direct the process from within.

But how should this be done? What should our aims and our values be? What vision do we have of a world that is in equilibrium?

If we wish to find a way out of the crisis we must first understand what has led to the crisis and what constitutes it. It is therefore necessary to outline some of the complex developments of the history of Western philosophy.

The crisis whose catastrophic consequences we are witnessing today is a crisis of Western thought. By the nineteenth-century it was already well underway and understood with astonishing clarity by philosophers and theologians as such. In his work *The Concept of Dread*,<sup>35</sup> published in 1844, Søren Kierkegaard proclaimed

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33 *Global denken*, p. 43.

34 This term is used in dynamic systems theory to describe the sudden change of direction in the evolution of a system. When a critical point is reached, the order collapses. The order changes in a chaotic way until a new order sets in (Laszlo, *op. cit.*, p. 39ff.). Cf. also Idem, "Footnotes to a History of the Future," in: *Futures* (October 1988, pp. 479-492); Idem, *The Age of Bifurcation*, New-York-London 1992. See also ch. II of the following essay, p. 58ff.

35 Translated with introduction and notes by Walter Lowrie, London: Oxford University Press, 1944.

an age of fear. Friedrich Nietzsche has been called the Cassandra<sup>36</sup> of modern culture, for unlike any previous writer he described in overwhelmingly powerful language the banality and triviality of modern life and the mortal sickness afflicting our civilization. He foresaw “a period of gloom and eclipse, the like of which has probably never taken place on earth before... A lengthy, vast and uninterrupted process of grumbling, destruction, ruin and overthrow which is now imminent.”<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to the dominant *Zeitgeist* of the period, which was characterized by the optimistic belief in progress, the hypothesis of a Western cultural crisis had, by the turn of the century, already gained widespread acceptance among intellectuals, regardless of their philosophical or ideological persuasion. After World War I, Oswald Spengler<sup>38</sup> aroused shock with his theory of the ageing of cultures and his vision of the downfall of the West. In 1931, the philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote: “The belief in the dawn of a magnificent future is offset by the horror of an abyss from which there is no hope of rescue.”<sup>39</sup> In 1959 the author Ernst Jünger, describing the visions of decline and the inevitability of the catastrophe, stated: “We are at the midnight of history, the hour of twelve has struck and we are looking out into darkness.”<sup>40</sup>

In the middle of the nineteenth century, from an entirely different cultural milieu then largely untouched by the spirit of modernism, came a prophetic voice announcing to mankind the warning of its impending demise. It predicted severe suffering, ordeals and disasters that would constitute divine Judgement, but also prom-

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36 Daughter of King Priam of Troy, gifted with the power of prophecy, but condemned by Apollo to be always disbelieved.

37 *The Joyful Wisdom*, no 343.

38 *The Decline of the West*, 2 vols., New York: Knopf, 1946.

39 *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, p. 16.

40 *An der Zeitmauer*, pp. 100, 166ff., 172ff.

ised the transformation to a new state of existence. We shall come back to this subject in due course.

### The Spirit of the Enlightenment

The global crisis originated in the Copernican transformation of European thinking in the 17th century, a transformation which was epitomized by such men as Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon and, in particular, René Descartes. This philosophical movement, the Western Enlightenment, was dominated by the idea of the absolute certainty of rational knowledge. Descartes exalted doubt to a method of analysis, laying the foundation for modern scientific thought and research. In the modern world, with its emphasis on science and technology, he saw nature and the universe as a perfect machine, functioning in accordance with rigid mechanical laws. He considered the whole of material existence explicable in terms of the arrangement and movement of its constituent parts. “To measure all that is measurable, and to render measurable what is not so,” such was Galileo’s formula.

This mechanical image of the world has remained the dominant paradigm<sup>41</sup> in the natural sciences well into this century. Only with the introduction of modern quantum theory has the limits of this paradigm become evident. Capra has rightly pointed out that the ruthless subjection and unscrupulous exploitation of nature has had its basis in the thinking of Descartes and of Francis Bacon.<sup>42</sup> After the geocentric image of the universe was overcome, man

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41 From Greek *paradeigma* = a pattern. Here a pattern of thinking: this concept is of key importance in the work of the American physicist and science historian Thomas S. Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*). The term “paradigm” “stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community” (Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 175); that is to say a model of explanation. See also ch. II of the following essay.

42 *The Turning Point*, pp. 24, 72ff.

himself became the central point of all existence—the geocentric world view was replaced by an anthropocentric one.

This powerful current of thought, the Enlightenment—described by Kant as “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity”<sup>43</sup>—was the belief in the rational transparency of the world. It was the belief—in the words of Max Weber—“that no mysterious and incalculable forces exist..., and that, in principle, all things can be mastered through calculation. This amounts to the de-mystification of the world.”<sup>44</sup>

The words of Horace, “*sapere aude!*,” became the slogan of the Enlightenment.<sup>45</sup> This philosophy has led directly to the belief that not only nature but also society can be manipulated, and to the idea that through rational action man has the unlimited capacity of bringing about universal human happiness.

### The Secularization of the World

This spirit of modernism has fundamentally altered the face of the world we live in. It has led to the development of science and technology, to the principle of instrumental rationality and, hence, to such values as freedom from presuppositions, the use of methodical discipline and objectivity. In the field of law, the Western Enlightenment gained major victories over barbarism: indeed, it is to this that we owe such principles as equality before the law and the separation of powers (Montesquieu), the triumphant progress of democracy, the abolition of torture and the humanization of penal law: in short, to Western Enlightenment we owe the modern constitutional state, which binds the

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43 *An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’*, p. 54.

44 “Science as Vocation,” p.139.

45 Translated by Kant in his essay “*An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’*” as “Have courage to use your *own* understanding!”

power of the rulers to the law and protects the citizen from governmental despotism.

Simultaneously, however, Enlightenment philosophy prompted a severe crisis of religious belief. The spirit of critical questioning penetrated every sphere of life, sweeping away the old authorities that for so long were held to be beyond all doubt. In reply to Napoleon's enquiry as to the place of God in his system, the French mathematician and astronomer Laplace<sup>46</sup> declared "I have no need of this hypothesis, Sir." Once reason laid claim to autonomy and took possession of the throne, which until then had been reserved for faith, the truth of divine revelation was disputed and religion was pronounced superfluous, even harmful. It has been one of the central dogmas of Enlightenment philosophy that in the wake of scientific, cultural and social progress religion will gradually die out—and over the past 300 years it has indeed been on the retreat. The Enlightenment brought about the increasing secularization of the world, while the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the philosophical critique of religion by Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. They shattered the traditional religious image of man and the world. Nietzsche's "God is dead!" took on slogan-quality. Since that time the non-religious, secular society and the mature, self-determining and self-realizing individual have become both reference point and objective.<sup>47</sup>

In the communist countries, atheism was (and is still<sup>48</sup>) an essential part of official state doctrine; but in the industrialized countries of the West, too, the masses have become indifferent towards religion. The tradition of lived faith has been uprooted.

The crisis in the Christian faith cannot be discussed in detail here. It manifests itself in the withering of religious traditions, in

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46 Pierre Simon Marquis de Laplace (1749-1823).

47 cf. Heinz Zahrnt, *Gotteswende*, p. 24ff.

48 in China, North Korea, Cuba.



the exodus from the Church,<sup>49</sup> in the dramatic decline in the significance of Christian convictions, and in the state of the belief structures of the remaining members of the Church. It is demonstrated most clearly of all in the crisis into which Christian theology itself has plunged.<sup>50</sup> The crisis is also reflected in the increasing rejection of institutionalized Christianity among the youth, and their turning instead towards radical worldliness and self-centredness: “The average day-to-day beliefs consist in the secular nature of values and the ideal of mental autarchy for the autonomous individual, who puts his faith only in that which he knows to be verifiable from his own experience (or through science working on his behalf).”<sup>51</sup>

This “twilight of the gods” which is advancing “into nothingness with a radicality hitherto unknown” was described by the philosopher Karl Jaspers in 1931 in the following terms:

A sense of desolation such as never experienced before can now be felt, something against which even the most radical un-

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49 In Germany, every year several hundred thousand Catholics and Protestants resign from Church membership; in 1991 more than 500 000.

50 This subject is dealt with in Udo Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion*, pp. 15-23; cf. also Cardinal Friedrich Wetter, “Zur Glaubenssituation in Deutschland,” in: *zur Debatte*, 19.1 (Jan./Feb. 1989), p. 2ff.

51 Heiner Barz, *Postmoderne Religion. Jugend und Religion*, vol. 2, p. 261. In this study, commissioned by the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Evangelischer Jugendverbände*, Barz comes to the conclusion that the young generation is characterized by the rejection of any doctrine and by suspicion of all traditions received from their parents and any institutions, and that they see in the Church primarily a “power apparatus” identical with that of the Party, the State or the Tax Office (p. 172). According to Barz, the Christian image of Jesus and the symbols of Christianity are of little relevance, and the teachings of the religion are frequently unknown. The concept of “sin” is either unknown or dismissed as “outdated” (p. 137). Barz speaks of the “subjectivization of truth,” through which “the sacred” has become changeable and unstable like work or fashion (p. 251). Among these young people the Asiatic religions have a generally better “image” because they also offer techniques for self-discovery in a private search for the meaning of life (p. 252).

belief of Antiquity was shielded by the abundance of forms of a never abandoned mythical reality.<sup>52</sup>

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was of the opinion that the process of secularization could no longer be reversed, and that a time was approaching when religion would cease to exist: “We are moving towards a completely religionless time, people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more.”<sup>53</sup> Another theologian, Heinz Zahrnt, acknowledges “the destruction of the very essence of religion: Something has really come to its final end in our times. Things will never again be as they were.”<sup>54</sup>

The spiritual vacuum left behind by the gradually dying Christian faith has been infiltrated by a new, secular form of religiosity: faith in reason and in progress; belief in the consummation of history through science and technology; and faith in mankind’s ability to create a better world, a paradise on earth. The attainment of happiness on earth through the revolutionizing of society as a whole—such is the manifesto of political messianism.<sup>55</sup> This secular religion of social salvation, whose tenets are the teachings of the French Enlightenment philosophers, clothed in the garments of science, has been substituted for the promise of salvation in the hereafter.

Ideology and utopian ideals, with their claims to unlimited authority and their promises of salvation, have taken the place of belief in divine revelation. The sense of purpose once provided by religion has been replaced by a sociological interpretation of existence. The individual, who now sees himself merely as a “social being” and no longer as one created by God, is concerned only

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52 *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, p. 16.

53 *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 279.

54 *The Question of God*, p.139.

55 cf. J. L. Talmon, *Political Messianism. The Romantic Phase*, London 1960.

with his social salvation, while the question of his soul and its salvation no longer has any relevance for him.<sup>56</sup>

“God will vanish without leaving even a trace of a question behind him.”<sup>57</sup> In making this prophecy, however, the French philosopher and founder of sociology Auguste Comte<sup>58</sup> has been grossly mistaken. It is the spirit of modernism itself which is in crisis: the foundations of secular faith, such as the belief in science and the omnipotence of reason, political messianism, the secular answers to the question of purpose and the secular promises of salvation, which were established in place of the old religions—all these are now exhausted. Belief in the ultimate realization of human happiness has disintegrated. The utopia of a man-made paradise on earth has failed. Within but a few years the optimistic belief in progress stemming from the Enlightenment has suddenly turned into profound pessimism. Today the process of progress that until recently inspired hope, provokes only fear.

The decay of belief in progress shattered the main pillar of secular faith in the meaning of history: “The paradise on earth proclaimed by revolutionaries, eloquent politicians and charismatic leaders has not appeared.”<sup>59</sup> Faith in enlightened reason, which still inspired the radical student protests of 1968 suffered a similar fate. In the face of the disasters for which it is historically responsible, reason appears to have lost much of its legitimizing power. Proponents of left-wing utopias have resigned themselves to the failure of their revolutionary hopes, their dreams of freedom and of changing the world.<sup>60</sup> The late philosopher Michel Fou-

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56 cf. U. Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion*, p. 10ff.

57 Quoted in: Karl Lehmann, *Vom Sinn christlicher Existenz zwischen Enthusiasmus und Institution*, p. 47.

58 1798–1857.

59 Wolfgang Kraus, *Nihilismus heute*, p. 138.

60 “Mortal dreams through which passes a caravan of icebergs” is how they are described by Hans-Magnus Enzensberger in his epic “*Der Untergang der Titanic*” (“The Sinking of the Titanic”), a parable about the state of the world.

cault saw in the world “not a single point through which a ray of hope could shine. There is no orientation any more.”<sup>61</sup> Jürgen Habermas, one of the most prominent contemporary German philosophers in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, speaks of the exhaustion of utopian energies and diagnoses a feeling of perplexity among intellectuals and politicians, and the loss of confidence in Western culture.<sup>62</sup> Only recently we experienced the shattering of an idea whose goal was the creation of a man-made paradise but which—in the Soviet Union alone—led to the largest mass-extirmination of all times.<sup>63</sup> In the past few years a storm of change has swept over the former socialist world and the idols worshipped for so long have fallen from their pedestals.

### The Spiritual Vacuum

Thus the spirit of modernism has not succeeded in filling the immense vacuum left by the slowly dwindling Christian faith. When it comes to such fundamental questions as “What is man?,” “What is the purpose of his existence and how should he live?,” reason and science have let us down. Answers to the question of the meaning of life and the question of basic values, along with a binding image of what man is, have not been pro-

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61 Stated in a radio interview.

62 *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*, p. 143.

63 In seventy years of despotism in the Soviet Union, “more people than ever before or since in human history were exterminated” (Sergei Solowjow, Radio Moscow, quoted in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 August 1990) through concentration camps, deportations, famines (resulting from the forced collectivization of agriculture), religious and political persecution. For the consolidation of its “stone-age communism,” the Pol-Pot regime in Cambodia annihilated around one million people, approximately a quarter of the population, predominantly the educated and intellectuals. The Cultural Revolution in China cost the lives of hundreds of thousands, further tens of thousands having committed suicide, while Mao-Tse Tung’s “Great Leap Forward” cost a further ten million lives as a result of starvation.

vided. Nietzsche called this phenomenon “nihilism,”<sup>64</sup> acknowledging and announcing it to be a consequence of the “death of God.” This nihilism, this transcendental homelessness of modern man, is the ultimate reason for the proliferation of aggressive impulses; for the sexualization of our lives; for the search for an escape route through drugs; for the desire to drop out of society; for the broad spectrum of social pathologies currently to be observed; and for our society’s superficial way of life with its emphasis on material commodities, on the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment, and on the immediate satisfaction of needs—in short, with its emphasis on narcissism<sup>65</sup> and hedonism.<sup>66</sup> For many people the self constitutes “the ultimate extent of their horizons.”<sup>67</sup> The rapid spread of lawlessness, the soaring crime-rate and terrorism are also included in the price a society has to pay when it has entirely banished the metaphysical. When there is no God and no metaphysical sanction for misdeeds; when our existence is purposeless and we ourselves

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64 “Nihilism stands at the door; whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?” (*The Will to Power*, Towards an Outline, 1). Wolfgang Kraus has traced the development of the nihilism proclaimed before the turn of the century by revolutionary thinkers throughout Europe which, with its anarchical spirit, was the inspiration of poets, artists, philosophers and psychologists. He describes how this nihilism, which was merely a prelude to a profound and general transformation of consciousness, has imperceptibly developed into a collective neurosis that has proven to be the real root of our spiritual crisis: “Disappointment, bitterness, this hatred of history, the illusions of the past and the reality of the present which has nothing to offer – these are the origins of the nihilism inundating us now. Nihilism is the counterpole of the hope of paradise on earth. We have reached this point. The avid desire ‘to be as God’ destroys opportunities. Failure, self-hate and loss of equilibrium are signs of an insidious apocalypse from within which, if no change takes place, can result in the dramatic self-annihilation of mankind” (*Nihilismus heute*, p. 138).

65 Cf. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co, Inc. 1979.

66 from Greek: *hedoné*: lust, desire; cf. *The Imperishable Dominion*, pp. 42ff., 61ff., 69ff., 171ff.

67 Heiner Barz, *Postmoderne Religion*, vol. 2 , pp. 251, 257.

draw up the guidelines according to which we want to live our lives; when earthly jurisdiction is also the Last Judgement, there is little motivation to do good and avoid evil.

The Enlightenment philosophers were convinced that ethical norms were eternal and evident through reason alone. Religion was unnecessary for man in determining how he should live, what he could morally do and should not do.<sup>68</sup> However, it soon became apparent that moral values are of an axiomatic nature. Once cut off from the humus of religion on which they grew, they gradually disintegrated in the acid bath of a one-dimensional rationalism. The critical questioning of all norms and the need for their rational justification, the foundation of any exclusively rational system of ethics, led at a breath-taking pace and within but a few decades to the complete relativization of all values, to a pluralism of non-binding concepts of what is right, and ultimately to the dissolution of traditional morality.<sup>69</sup>

It has become evident that “without God, morality is cut adrift, the last moorings are gone.”<sup>70</sup> Reason and science are incapable of overcoming the nihilism of values, since ethical norms are only observed if people believe in them. The incompetence of reason and science where norms and values are concerned<sup>71</sup> was ac-

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68 In 1843 Pierre Joseph Proudhon wrote: “*La loi morale... est éternelle et absolue;... Eh! qui donc aujourd’hui oserait attaquer la morale?*” (“Moral law is eternal and absolute; ... Who then today would dare attack morals?”) (*De la création de l’ordre dans l’humanité, ou principes d’organisation politique*, p. 58).

69 On this subject cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame/Indiana 1981.

70 Pribilla, in: August Messer/Max Pribilla, *Katholisches und modernes Denken*, p. 95.

71 On this subject see U. Schaefer, *Die Freiheit und ihre Schranken*, p. 38ff.; cf. also my paper *Bahā’ī Ethics. An Introduction in the Light of the Scripture*, ch. VI,4, 5 (in preparation).

knowledge towards the end of his life by no less a person than the founder of “Critical Theory”, Max Horkheimer.<sup>72</sup>

This process of erosion has had far-reaching consequences for society, whose stability depends on there being a generally accepted value system; on a consensus among its members with regard to its goals and the permissible means of attaining them. The less the extent to which such consensus exists, the more vulnerable society is to disruption and instability. This process is the main cause for the increasing ungovernability so deplored in modern industrial societies.

### New Offers of Salvation—New Age

Since the early 1970s there has been a perceptible turning away from a purely materialistic way of thinking to the transcendental. There is renewed interest in religious values and spirituality. The one-sided rationalism of modern times has been unable to satisfy the hunger of the starving soul. People feel the chill of the rational coolness of our society and long for orientation and meaning in life. They realize that the cycle of production and consumption alone cannot provide such meaning. A general feeling has arisen that sees in spiritual experiences and in the expansion of consciousness the key to our deliverance from the crisis. The important theme at the end of the twentieth century is not science or politics, but religion. However, this interest in religion bypasses the traditional religion, established Christianity, and is concentrated instead on phe-

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72 “There is no logical, compelling reason why I should not hate, provided it is not to my disadvantage in society. All attempts to base morality on worldly reason instead of seeing it in relation to the hereafter... are built upon illusions. In the final analysis, everything pertaining to morality may be logically traced back to theology” (*Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz anderen*, p. 60).

nomena from which theology dissociates itself and which it disparages as “syncretism.”<sup>73</sup>

The hippie movement was an early form of protest against the understanding of reality expressed in the idea of a world in which everything could be rationally explained. Hippies believed that drugs could release their powers of perception and give them access to true reality—a fatal assumption! Since then a constantly growing market for new paths offering salvation has been opened. Today millions of people in the USA and Europe are seeking contact with traditions and teachers in whom they hope to find the right path. New offers of salvation are constantly emerging, with bizarre and pseudo-religious cults and guru-movements, often with very worldly aims, finding popular appeal. But confidence is already diminishing in religious leaders and gurus who, through their doctrines and the authoritarian structure of their movements, have promised their followers something to hold onto and offered clear guidance as to right and wrong. They have now concluded that no guru can show the right way. Every individual must search for the right way in his inner self.

More and more people are endeavouring to find their true self along the path of “enlightenment,” seeking refuge in such widely varying traditions as Western esotericism and Eastern mysticism. Psychocults,<sup>74</sup> esoteric groups and occultism are characteristic of the innumerable representatives of this scene.

Who would have thought that in our enlightened world an ever-growing number of people would devote themselves to astrology,

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73 cf. Carl-Friedrich Geyer, *Die Wiederkehr mythischen Denkens*, p. 7.

74 Western society is seized by a veritable psycho-boom. Over 800 different types of therapy are on offer in Germany alone, ranging from the classical Freudian to various Far-Eastern sectarian types; from seminars on herbal medicine to the training of managers on the basis of group dynamics. We are here confronted with psychology extending beyond the bounds of the medical profession and offering instead ways of finding meaning and orientation in life, and as such constituting a world-view or a sort of secular faith.



hypnosis, Zen-Buddhism, reincarnation therapy, magic and occult practices, native American mythology and shamanism? Who would have thought that there would be increasing numbers of people consulting fortune-tellers and astrologers—among them eminent business managers? Everything that enlightened reason once considered to be obscurantism has resurfaced: magic,<sup>75</sup> witchcraft,<sup>76</sup> exorcism, animistic practices, and even bloody rituals of animal sacrifice. This calls to mind the words of Pascal, who stated that “*Incrédules les plus crédules, ils croient les miracles de Vespasien pour ne pas croire ceux de Moïse.*”<sup>77</sup>

The non-organized, extremely diversiform movement known as New Age has been influenced by a vagabond religiosity encompassing a great variety of traditions, origins and contents. Hence, it is very difficult to find a common denominator. What we are faced with here is escape from a purely secular image of the world. The movement is based on the consciousness that we are living at a turning-point in history; that the old, crisis-ridden paradigm, the mechanistic world-view, is to be overcome and replaced by a new, holistic view of reality, a new paradigm. This new paradigm has initiated a new age. We are on the threshold of an evolutionary leap, in the course of which the transformation of human consciousness to “cosmic consciousness” will result in a new man who will live in harmony with himself and with his environment.

The New Age paradigm is founded on a holistic view of the world. Man is seen in a pantheistic, monistic way as part of the Divine. Everything is one. Man is a fragment of cosmic con-

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75 Hans Jörg Hemminger (ed.), *Die Rückkehr der Zauberer. New Age. Eine Kritik*, Wiesbaden 1987.

76 Hans-Jürgen Ruppert, *Die Hexen kommen. Magie und Hexenglaube heute*, Wiesbaden 1987.

77 *Pensées* 431 (Br 114–816). In the English edition (*Thoughts* no. 816) it reads: “Unbelievers the most credulous. They believe the miracles of Vespasian, in order not to believe those of Moses” [Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus, Roman emperor, 69–79 A. D.].

consciousness and thus every individual possesses divinity. There is no personal God who reveals himself to mankind, and hence no absolute truth. Christ is the path of “enlightenment,” the way to identification with our own self. Each one of us is Christ.<sup>78</sup> Capra sees God as “the dynamic for the self-organization of the entire cosmos.”<sup>79</sup> For Rudolf Bahro, “the Deity” is identical with nature, the origin “from which all life sprang and to which modern man, in his state of growing disorientation, must turn once again.”<sup>80</sup> We read, for example, individual testimonies stating that: “I am with God the Creator; a ‘new heaven’ appears whilst I proclaim God’s Will on Earth... In truth I am God’s Christ ... God is everything and everything is God ... The salvation of the earth is now before my eyes, for all erroneous beliefs and thought-patterns have vanished.”<sup>81</sup>

If man bears the Divine within himself or is himself divine,<sup>82</sup> he cannot find the standards for his conduct anywhere but in himself. In the spirit of “*Chacun pour soi*” each individual has the freedom to choose what he thinks best: “*Anything goes!*”<sup>83</sup> Every way is equally valid. There are no generally applicable standards, no such categories as right and wrong, or good and evil. Each person is responsible only for himself. He must accept everyone else as he or she is and can expect others to accept him as he is. In this

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78 “Christ is that life, love, intelligence and energetic power which maintains all creation in existence. It is within each of us... The Christ is revealed when we come together... Christ is a consciousness, an attitude, an orientation towards oneself and one’s universe, he is not a dogma, a set of laws or a teaching” (David Spangler, *Reflections on the Christ*, pp. 14, 19, 30).

79 *The Turning Point*, p. 317.

80 *Logik der Rettung*, p. 260.

81 Quoted, in: Basilea Schlink, *New Age. Le Mouvement du Nouvel Age à la Lumière de la Bible*, p. 6.

82 “Experienced in this way, meditation is not to beg and to pray to a god, but return to the Divine in ourselves” (Rudolf Bahro, *Logik der Rettung*, p. 291).

83 A maxim formulated by the philosopher Paul K. Feyerabend (*Against Method*, p. 14).

general atmosphere of postmodern metaphysical arbitrariness, religion is regarded only as a method of finding a path to the attainment of one's own divinity.

This new type of postmodern religiosity, whereby man takes control of himself through self-realization, self-experience and enlightenment; in which he meditates upon his origins and becomes aware of his divine nature. This is nothing other than the revival of the phenomenon of *Gnosis*, which we know from the late Graeco-Roman world of early Christianity. An essential feature of this nebulous "freely wandering religiosity," which is characterized by "indistinct syncretism" and by the use of the religions of the world as "a huge quarry,"<sup>84</sup> is its setting of the goal of salvation at a purely individualistic, egotistical<sup>85</sup> level. It is believed that harmony among mankind will inevitably come about when spiritual movements gain pace and large numbers of people succeed in attaining cosmic consciousness. Political action is not necessary for this purpose.

### A New Epiphany

Auguste Comte's prophecy that God would vanish without leaving even the trace of a question behind Him was disproved within his own lifetime. The middle of the last century was a time of contrary historical developments. Whereas philosophers in the West pronounced God dead, there was simultaneously a hitherto unparalleled upsurge of messianic hopes, and even of Adventist groups awaiting the return of Christ.

During this time in the Islamic world (in Iran), there emerged a new faith: the Bahā'ī Faith. It bore all the characteristics of a prophetic religion. It displayed the archetypal features we know from

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84 Heinz Zahrnt, *Gotteswende*, p. 42.

85 *heilsegoistisch*

religious history, in particular from Christianity: a forerunner, who called himself the Bāb<sup>86</sup> and who prepared the way for the founder of the new faith, Bahā'u'llāh. Whereas the Bāb was executed in 1850, Bahā'u'llāh remained throughout his 40-year ministry a prisoner and an exile.

The Bahā'ī Faith to which the theologian Gerhard Rosenkranz has referred to as one of the “most fascinating phenomena of modern religious history,”<sup>87</sup> is the most recent of the revealed religions and is classified as a world religion by many scholars of comparative religious studies.<sup>88</sup> During its 150-year history it has spread to almost all the countries of the world and in geographical terms is the second most widespread religion after Christianity.<sup>89</sup> In recent years it has drawn public attention through headlines about the bloody persecutions suffered by the Bahā'īs under the clerical regime in Iran.

The phenomenon of a new prophetic religion is closely linked to the theme we are dealing with, since long before the protagonists of the New Age movement diagnosed the dawning of a new

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86 the Gate.

87 *Die Baha'i*, p. 7.

88 cf. *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. V, pp. 115-132, under the heading “Bahā'īs-mus”; Peter Meinhold, *Die Religionen der Gegenwart*, p. 317ff.; Smith, P./M. Momen, “The Bahā'ī Faith 1957-1988: A Survey of Contemporary Developments,” in: *Religion*, 19 (1989), pp. 63-91; Paul D. Numrich, “The Bahā'ī Faith in World Religions Textbooks,” in: *World Order* 25.1, p. 51ff.; Fazel, Seena, “Is the Bahā'ī Faith a World Religion?,” in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* (March-June 1994), pp. 1-14; Udo Schaefer, *The Bahā'ī Faith – Sect or Religion?*, pp. 16ff. A scholar of Near-Eastern studies, Professor Christian Cannuyer, of the University of Louvain/Belgium characterized the Bahā'ī Faith as follows: “*Sécrité par l'Islam shī'ite, considéré par les āyatu-llāhs de l'Iran actuel comme une hérésie nuisible, relégué par d'autres au rang de secte, le bahā'isme est en réalité aujourd'hui une religion de dimension universelle qui n'appartient plus à la mouvance musulmane. C'est un 'monothéisme abrahamique' à part entière: par ses doctrines originales, il mérite l'intérêt. Par son message d'amour, sa tolérance et son action humanitaire, il suscite la sympathie. Par ses nombreux martyrs, en Iran et ailleurs, il a droit au respect*” (*Les Bahā'īs*, p. 7).

89 *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Britannica Book of the Year 1988*, p. 303.

era, the Bahā'īs were already announcing that a new age had been inaugurated. The Bahā'īs live in the conviction that the living God, who through his messengers and prophets spoke in the past to the peoples of the earth, communicating to them His Will and His Laws, has at this decisive point in world history once again spoken to mankind. In Bahā'u'llāh, they see a central event of absolute significance, the absolute eschatological turning-point: through him God has revealed Himself to humanity.

At all times such a prophetic claim has appeared strange, ridiculously arrogant, sheerly presumptuous. To modern man it is even more of a *skandalon* than the claim associated with the figure of Christ was to the people of Antiquity. According to St. Paul, the Christian faith was “unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.”<sup>90</sup> Bahā'u'llāh's message, too, is a stumbling-block to those who still believe and regard his claim as human usurpation. It seems to be foolishness to those for whom God is dead or who imagine that they can achieve salvation by looking into their own soul, just as Münchhausen saved himself from the swamp by pulling himself out by his own hair.<sup>91</sup> The new Book of God is a provocation.<sup>92</sup> Bahā'u'llāh foresaw this when he spoke about “the fears and agitation which the revelation provokes in men's hearts.”<sup>93</sup>

In the context of Islamic eschatology, the advent of the Bāb and of Bahā'u'llāh was the fulfilment of the expectation of a global

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90 I Cor. 1:23.

91 Cf. “Baron Münchhausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia” (Oxford 1785). In one of these stories, Münchhausen tells how he once fell into a swamp when he was out riding. He describes how he managed to save himself at the last minute by seizing his own hair and pulling himself out.

92 The provocation of the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, which recently has been published in English (Bahā'u'llāh, *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas. The Most Holy Book*, Haifa 1992), is discussed in U. Schaefer: “‘The Balance hath been Appointed’: Some Thoughts on the Publication of the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*,” in: *The Bahā'ī Studies Review* 3.1, p. 43ff.).

93 *Gleanings* 88.

upheaval at the end of time, a point which had now been reached.<sup>94</sup> However, the Bahā'īs see in the coming of Bahā'u'llāh the fulfilment not only of Islamic eschatological expectations. The Catholic theologian Thomas Sartory<sup>95</sup> has pointed out that according to the eschatological expectations of all religions there would appear in the Last Days a Promised One who would, after a period of chaos and horror, renew the world and bring about a new era of peace and justice. Bahā'u'llāh himself has claimed to be the fulfilment of all these prophetic promises. In his Tablet to Pope Pius IX he expressly referred to Christ's promise of his return: "The Word which the Son concealed<sup>96</sup> is made manifest,<sup>97</sup> ... the Spirit of Truth<sup>98</sup> has come to lead you into all truth<sup>99</sup> ... Verily, the day of the ingathering<sup>100</sup> is come ... He hath stored away that which He chose in the vessels of justice, and cast into fire that which befitteth it."<sup>101</sup>

The Bahā'īs believe that world history is cyclical; it is divided into universal cycles and aeons. The Adamic cycle, the universal cycle which began 6000 years ago and during which the great founders of the world's religions appeared, has been terminated with the new revelation.<sup>102</sup> With Bahā'u'llāh a new universal cycle has begun. His epiphany marks the opening of the new era. This finds expression in the calendar used by the Bahā'īs that begins in the year 1844.

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94 cf. Qur'ān 4:89; 6:31; 7:187; 18:21; 20:102; 22:7; 39:68; 78:1-2 etc.

95 "Zeitenwende? Die Hoffnung der Religionen auf einen kommenden Retter," in: Ingrid Riedel (ed.), *Der unverbrauchte Gott*, pp. 183, 195.

96 cf. John 16:12.

97 *The Proclamation of Bahā'u'llāh*, p. 84.

98 cf. John 16:13.

99 *Tablets* 2:12; *Gleanings* 116:1.

100 cf. Matt. 13:30, 39.

101 *The Proclamation of Bahā'u'llāh*, p. 86.

102 cf. Bāb, *Selections* 6:11:5.

Bahā'īs believe that the decisive turning-point which nineteenth century thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche expected, and which Adventists and Millenarians longed for and considered imminent, has taken place in this age: “The stillest words are those which bring the storm. Thoughts that come on doves’ feet lead the world.”<sup>103</sup> This event has come upon mankind as Christ had foretold: like a thief in the night, at a time that no-one expected.<sup>104</sup>

### The New Paradigm

In addition to the cyclical interpretation of history in the Bahā'ī teachings, there is a corresponding belief in the progressive, cyclical outpouring of divine revelation in accordance with the requirements of the particular time. The epiphanies of the great religions mark the turning-points in human history. Whereas Christian teachings portray the history of salvation as being exclusively the biblical history of God’s words and actions between the fall of Adam and the redemption of Christ, the Bahā'ī Faith teaches that the whole of religious history is the history of salvation, encompassing all revealed religions. Thus, the concept of revelation is universal in dimension:

These firmly-established and mighty systems have proceeded from one Source, and are rays of one Light.<sup>105</sup>

The doctrine of the mystical unity of all religions and of all prophets is a central element of Bahā'ī theology as is the rejection of all claims to uniqueness and to the finality of salva-

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103 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (“The Stillest Hour”) Part III, p. 162.

104 Matt. 24:43; I Thess. 5:2; Rev. 3:3; 16:15.

105 *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 18 (p. 13).

tion.<sup>106</sup> The history of salvation is a continuous, open-ended process.

In a profusion of apocalyptic verses Bahā'u'llāh has described what will precede the regeneration of the world: mankind's abandonment of religion,<sup>107</sup> an increase in lawlessness, the spread of injustice and tyranny, the break-down of order and numerous tribulations inundating humanity from every side.

Above all, however, Bahā'u'llāh is the messenger of glad tidings. He has renewed God's eternal promise of salvation through a new covenant. In countless texts he has shown us the way out of the crisis, providing hope and abolishing the idea that the human species is doomed.<sup>108</sup> It is only through a fundamental change of values and by turning to God, through repentance,<sup>109</sup> that the new man will emerge and be capable of survival. The world's major problems, the solution of which is essential if mankind is to sur-

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106 Shoghi Effendi calls such claims "pure blasphemy" (*The World Order of Bahā'u'llāh*, p. 58). On these claims cf. Seena Fazel/Khazeh Fananapazir, "A Bahā'ī Approach to the Claim to Exclusivity and Uniqueness in Christianity," in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* 3.2, p. 15ff.; *ibid.*, "A Bahā'ī Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam," *op. cit.* 5.3, p. 17ff.

107 cf. *Gleanings* 99; Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 117.

108 "How long will humanity persist in its waywardness? How long will injustice continue? How long is chaos and confusion to reign amongst men? How long will discord agitate the face of society? The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divideth and afflicteth the human race is daily increasing... Soon shall the blasts of His chastisement beat upon you, and the dust of hell enshroud you (*Tablets* 11:26; *Gleanings* 103:5) ... O ye peoples of the world! Know verily that an unforeseen calamity is following you and that grievous retribution awaiteth you. Think not the deeds ye have committed have been blotted from My sight" (*The Hidden Words*, Persian 63). In this connection Bahā'u'llāh speaks of a global convulsion, which will precede the rise of the Cause of God: "And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly appear that which will cause the limbs of mankind to quake. Then, and only then, will the Divine Standard be unfurled, and the Nightingale of Paradise warble its melody (*Gleanings* 61) ... Oppression will envelope the world. And following a universal convulsion, the sun of justice will rise from the horizon of the unseen realm" (quoted from Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 121).

109 *metanoia*: cf. Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:15: "Repent ye" (*metanoieite*).



vive, are solved in the Scripture of Bahā'u'llāh: the securing of world peace; the abolition of war; the overcoming of the ecological crisis and of the spiritual crisis epitomized by nihilism.

The securing of world peace<sup>110</sup> and the solution to the ecological crisis<sup>111</sup> are both problems too complex to be considered in detail here. According to Bahā'u'llāh the spiritual crisis; the loss of meaning and values resulting in the dissolution of morality; the disintegration and the decomposition of society have their ultimate cause in the disintegration of man's faith in God. Bahā'u'llāh makes abundantly clear that this decline of religion cannot be redeemed by human efforts at reforming and re-animating the old religions. True reformation and renewal can come only from God in the form of a new revelation.<sup>112</sup>

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110 According to Bahā'u'llāh, the conditions for universal lasting peace (such as demanded by Immanuel Kant in his essay *Perpetual Peace*, published in 1795) are: the overcoming of all religious, racial, and political prejudices and barriers; a new ethical code based on faith; the all-embracing love of mankind; the consciousness of membership of the human race, and a new level of political existence through the replacement of the current order based on the nation-state by a federal world community, i. e., the spiritual and political unity of mankind. The driving force for this spiritual and political transformation is the new, creative, transforming Word of God, the *lógos*, which has already in the past brought about gigantic changes. Cf. Ulrich Gollmer, "Der lange Weg zum Größten Frieden," in: *Bahā'ī-Briefe* vol. 50 (October 1985), p. 128ff.; vol. 52 (December 1986), p. 204ff.; also U. Gollmer, *Gottesreich und Weltgestaltung. Grundlegung einer politischen Theologie im Bahā'ītum* (thesis, still unpublished).

111 Bahā'u'llāh predicted this crisis just as clearly as he foresaw the development of nuclear power and the problems associated with the splitting of the atom. At a time when the first industrial revolution was just at its outset and the whole process could have been kept under control, he warned of the danger of uncontrolled civilization which might lead to the destruction of the environment: "The civilization .... will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men" (*Gleanings* 163:2). The solution he proposes is not the return to pre-industrial conditions but moderation, the virtue of the right measure upon which the promotion of true civilization depends. For further discussion of this topic, cf. Robert A. White, "Spiritual Foundations for an Ecologically Sustainable Society," in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* 2.1, p. 33ff. On the cardinal virtue of moderation see my forthcoming paper *Bahā'ī Ethics*, Part III.

112 "What else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it?"

From the above brief outline it is evident that the Bahā'ī Faith has a number of aspects in common with the ideas, attitudes and interpretations of the New Age movement:

- We are living at a turning-point in history, on the threshold of a new era
- The old social order is disintegrating
- Overcoming outdated modes of thinking and defunct forms is a painful process
- Mankind needs to develop a new consciousness
- An evolutionary leap will call into existence a “new man” and a new world of harmony
- A fundamental change in our way of thinking is required, replacing the one-sided cognitive, antagonistic approach by an integral, holistic one
- Such a new way of thinking is already perceptible
- Rationality must be complemented by spirituality, i. e., science by religion.

All these are positions that can be granted wholehearted assent from the point of view of the Bahā'ī teachings. From the Bahā'ī perspective, the fact that these ideas are put forward by such widely varying groups is a reflection of the spirit of the age (*Zeitgeist*) resulting from the revelation of Bahā'u'llāh himself. It is the effect of the creative, animating Word of God which has entered the world through the epiphany of Bahā'u'llāh. The world is moving in the direction he has indicated without being aware of this eschatological event. Of course, this is evident only to the eyes of those who believe. Using empirical reason alone, however, the historian can observe the depth of Bahā'u'llāh's insight into the world; he can confirm the extent to which Bahā'u'llāh's analyses have proven to be correct and

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(*Gleanings* 99).

how many of the requirements he set forth are beginning to be met or are in the process of accomplishment.

Furthermore, the Bahā'īs see a paradigm shift occurring especially in the field of religion. In contrast to the old ecclesiastical paradigm, formulated in the Apostolic Creed, of the unique drama of salvation through God's incarnate son; who lived among men; suffered on Calvary; rose to Heaven; redeemed the world of its sins and reconciled God with humanity—the new paradigm depicts a divine economy of salvation. It postulates that there is a continuous process of the education of the human race by the prophets and messengers of God; a God who gradually manifests himself at historical intervals and who has redeemed his messianic promises in Bahā'u'llāh.

### Cardinal Differences

The most striking contrast with the “new religiosity” is that for the Bahā'īs, to quote Pascal, God is the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and “not the God of the philosophers.”<sup>113</sup> He is the Creator, the Lord of History, who speaks to mankind through the mouth of his prophets. God is not merely a cipher for our “humaneness” as atheist theologians teach,<sup>114</sup> or, as Capra sees it, “the dynamic for the self-organization of the entire cosmos.”

The second profound difference is in the image of man. According to Bahā'u'llāh, man has been created by God. He is not an accidental by-product of a “general cosmic consciousness.” Nei-

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113 Blaise Pascal, *Mémorial*, fr. 555; cf. Ex. 3:6; Matt. 22:32; Acts 3:13; *Qur'ān* 12:38; *Tablets* 17:122.

114 “Man as man, man with his brotherly love, implies God,” formulates the Protestant theologian Herbert Braun (*Gesammelte Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt*, p. 325), referring to I John 4:7 (“for love is God”). See also Dorothee Sölle, *Atheistisch an Gott glauben*, Olten 1968.

ther is man a part of the Divine; nor a fragment of the whole. As in all monotheistic religions, the rank of creature—the ontological station of man as a created being—cannot be transcended. This amounts to the rejection of the monistic, pantheistic image of man portrayed by the groups under discussion.

A further fundamental contrast with the new religiosity pertains to its subjectivistic concept of truth, the “subjectivism of truth.”<sup>115</sup> If there is no common, indivisible, generally applicable truth, if everyone is obliged to seek his own truth valid only for himself, then truth is merely a husk with changing contents. If, on the other hand, religion is to be believed in and experienced as truth, then the claim to truth must be universal, i. e., it must be applicable to all. In the words of St. Augustine, truth is “not mine, nor thine, but common to all.”<sup>116</sup> Likewise, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā says “If it be true, it is for all; if not, it is for no one.”<sup>117</sup> This universalism of truth is characteristic of all the great world religions, especially of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition to which the Bahā’ī Faith belongs. The Bahā’ī Faith is founded not on a general, non-committal yearning of the human heart: it is founded on the Word of God revealed to the whole of mankind by Bahā’u’llāh.<sup>118</sup>

Finally, the redemption of man is seen quite differently. It is not seen as “man’s own creation” through “cosmic consciousness”

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115 Heiner Barz, *Postmoderne Religion*, p. 134ff.

116 “*Quia communis est omnibus veritas. Non est nec mea, nec tua; non est illius, aut illius; omnibus communis est*” (*Enarrationes in Psalmos LXXV 17 [20]*). “*Non habeo quasi privatum meum, nec tu privatum tuum. Veritas nec mea sit propria, nec tua, ut et tua sit et mea*” (*ibid.* CIII, 11 [25]).

117 Quoted in Esslemont, *Bahā’u’llāh and the New Era*, p. 236.

118 Oskar Schatz has rightly pointed out that the situation of conflict in the “post-modern” era has altered: “It is no longer a case of institutionalized religion versus science, but one of religion and science on the one hand versus the ‘new mythologies’ on the other” (O. Schatz/Hans Spatenegger [ed.], *Wovon werden wir morgen geistig leben? Mythos, Religion und Wissenschaft in der “Postmoderne,”* Vorwort p. 11; cf. also Franz König, “Die Beziehungen zwischen Wissenschaft und Religion aus der Sicht unserer Zeit,” pp. 25, 31).

but as an act of salvation by God, with man responding by turning in faith to God's revelation and submitting his entire life to the Will of God. It is the new covenant between God and man promised by the prophets.<sup>119</sup> The rainbow, which the New Age movement has adopted as the symbol of man's self-creation and self-redemption through cosmic consciousness, is the sign of God's covenant<sup>120</sup> in the Bible. At the heart of God's Covenant is the Law, the divine commandments upon which man should shape his life. The Bahā'ī Faith is characterized by the belief that without effort; without shaping one's entire life in accordance with divine standards, one cannot achieve salvation, neither in this world nor in the hereafter. Without a clearly marked path, the destination cannot be reached. Without binding standards, it is impossible to imagine how the immense problems facing modern society: the pluralism and non-committal nature of ethical values, and the lack of a generally accepted and binding moral code are to be overcome. Since man for obvious reasons does not grant his fellow men any authority in the field of morality, the moral code can only be a *theonomous*<sup>121</sup>: God is the Law-Giver.

### The Future

“The path to the future still lies open before us. Never before has there been such an age. It is an age of *breakdown* or of *breakthrough*; but to break through unto a future of promise, possibilities and peace the human family must strive to transform itself.”<sup>122</sup> This transformation will require effort, discipline, the acquisition of new habits of thought, attitudes and skills. The Bahā'ī Faith which provides the way to this trans-

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119 cf. Is. 55:3; 61:8; 65:17; Micah 4:1-4.

120 cf. Gen. 9:13.

121 From Greek: *théos* = God and *nomos* = law.

122 Suheil Bushrui, *Retrieving Our Spiritual Heritage*, pp. 12/13.

formation, shares with the New Age movement an optimistic vision of the future of mankind: the hope, nay rather the certitude, that beyond the horrors and the suffering currently assailing humanity a bright future awaits us. The apocalyptic disasters of our time are the birth-pangs of a new era in which the promised messianic kingdom—the “Kingdom of God on Earth”—will be established and as Bahā’u’llāh has promised, the earth will become “the footstool of God.”<sup>123</sup> *Non est ad astra mollis e terris via*: There is no easy way from the earth to the stars.<sup>124</sup>

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123 *Gleanings* 14:6; cf. Matth. 5:35.

124 Seneca, *Tragedies*, *Hercules furens*, verse 437.

On the Diversity  
and  
Unity of Religions





*Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers?*

Malachi 2:10



## I.

### Prefatory Note on the Concept of Paradigm<sup>1</sup>

The terms “paradigm” and “paradigm-shift” play a central role in Thomas S. Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. According to Kuhn, an American physicist and science theoretician, scientific knowledge is always based on a model of interpretation (a paradigm) which is generally accepted by the scientific community at a particular time. Examples of such a paradigm—a word standing for “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by a member of a given community”<sup>2</sup>—would be the Ptolomaic, ecclesiastical image of the world, which was dominant in the Middle Ages prior to the discoveries of Galileo; and the post-Galilean heliocentric world-view, by which it was superseded.

The concept of paradigm has meanwhile found acceptance in other disciplines, including theology.<sup>3</sup> In this branch of study paradigm is used to denote the basic image one has of religion and of theology. It denotes the pattern according to which the diversity of religious phenomena is understood and interpreted.

In selecting the term “unity paradigm” the author intends to convey the new understanding of religion: the new image of religious phenomena and of religious history; and its inherent concept of divine salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*). This concept of unity is central to the teachings of Bahā’u’llāh.

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1 From Greek *paradeigma* : a model, pattern.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

3 cf. Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, pp. 2, 120ff., 125ff.; H. Küng/Josef van Ess, *Christianity and the Religions of the World*, pp. 51, 347; H. Küng, *Paradigm Change in Theology*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989.

## II. The New Paradigm: Unity

When considering the great world religions it is striking how each one seems to be centred around one main idea to which all others are subordinated. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahā pointed out: “In every Dispensation the light of Divine Guidance has been focused upon one central theme.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, distinguishing epithets have been attached to the religions on this basis, Christianity being referred to as the “religion of love;” Judaism as the “religion of justice;” Islam as the “religion of absolute submission;” Buddhism as the “religion of detachment;” Zoroastrianism as the “religion of purity.” If one were to ascribe such an epithet to the Bahā’ī Faith it would undoubtedly be the “religion of unity,” for unity is its central theme and the starting point of all theological consideration of its teachings.

This theme is found on three levels: in the unity of God, in the unity of the prophets or “Manifestations,”<sup>5</sup> and in the unity of mankind. The last-mentioned has been referred to by Shoghi Effendi as “the pivot round which the teachings of Bahā’u’llāh revolve.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā said that

In this wondrous Revelation, this glorious century, the foundation of the Faith of God and the distinguishing feature of His Law is the consciousness of the Oneness of Mankind.<sup>7</sup>

This is the focus of the immanent, programmatic dimension of the Bahā’ī Faith. Indeed, Bahā’u’llāh himself says that he has

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4 Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahā’u’llāh*, p. 36 (see also ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections 77:2*).

5 On the concept of the “Manifestation” see ch. XI, 3 (p. 126).

6 *World Order*, p. 42.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 36 (see also ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections 77:2*).

come “to vivify the world and to bring into unity all who are on the face of the earth”<sup>8</sup>

The theological pivot, however, is the teaching of the unity of the Manifestations and, hence, the unity of the religions. This doctrine, which is the quintessence of one of the earliest and most significant works of Bahā’u’llāh, the *Kitāb-i-Īqān*,<sup>9</sup> opens up a completely new perspective on the diverse panorama of beliefs. It is with this new perspective that the current essay is concerned. In the final chapter a closer look will be taken at the new concept of salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*), which can lead us to a greater appreciation of this religious diversity, to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of religion *per se*, and to the new paradigm characterized by the concept of unity.

### III.

#### The Diversity of Religions

The saying that wonder is the beginning of philosophy is also true of religious studies. In this case, it is wonder at the immense diversity of religious beliefs. The history of religion resembles a broad and mighty river with many tributaries. As far as our knowledge of history goes, there has always been religion. At certain times there unpredictably appeared out of its stream the figure of a prophet who, with a new creative impulse, hastened its hitherto sluggish flow and set it in a new direction. Such an appearance was always accompanied by an epochal hiatus, the splitting of ways and the making of a decision. This meant the rejection of stale and rigid traditions and a turn towards a new future. Accordingly, each of the great world

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8 *Lawḥ-i-Ra’īs*, quoted in J. E. Esslemont, *Bahā’u’llāh and the New Era*, p. 147.

9 *The Book of Certitude*, Wilmette/Ill., 1950.

religions adopted a new calendar to mark the new era which had begun.

The fact that religion appears in such colourful variety—that there is not one single religion but a plurality—has always been a source of irritation for people. Religions are in many ways similar, and yet they are so different; there is much which unites them, but also much which divides them. This is indeed irritating. All the world religions teach that there is only one ultimate reality, which we call God. If that is so, there can logically only be one truth: But if there is only one truth, why are there so many religions?

Believers have always been annoyed by the existence of other religions apart from their own, the only true one. Most religious thinkers have been content either to ignore other religions or to argue against them, while sceptical non-believers, the critics of religion, have always seen the plurality of religions as an argument in their favour. The competition between various doctrines, commandments, rites and rituals, between rival claims to truth and exclusivity appear to testify against religion. Surely only one can really be right, but how can this one be found?

#### IV.

#### The Absoluteness and the Relativity of Religious Claims to Truth

That religion is always associated with a claim to truth is self-evident. Something that is untrue is by its nature unworthy of faith. All of the world religions, in particular those of the Near Eastern tradition, i. e., the prophetic religions of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, to which the Bahā'ī Faith belongs, make absolute claims to truth. Each is convinced that it possesses a divine message brought by its founder which to

them is “the way, the truth and the life,”<sup>10</sup> the “Straight Path,”<sup>11</sup> the “Right Path.”<sup>12</sup> Naturally, this is the yardstick by which all other religions are judged.

All human thought, all striving for truth, all philosophy must be prefaced with the motto “*errare humanum est*”. In Goethe’s *Faust* we read: “When mortals strive they go astray.”<sup>13</sup> By contrast, truth that emanates from God is absolute. We can accept or reject it, but once accepted it is no longer a matter of choice. It is authoritative, categorical, above criticism and not in need of rational justification. It may not be watered down or unhinged by relativism. This is logical and consistent. It is this very factor that makes out the distinction between revealed religion and philosophy, which belongs in a different category altogether. In philosophy, provided the laws of logic are respected, one can be selective and eclectic. The same cannot be done with divine revelation. In the *Kitāb-i-Īqān*, Bahā’u’llāh disparages those who accept from the revelation only the elements which correspond to their “inclinations and interests” and “reject those which are contrary to their selfish desires.”<sup>14</sup> The Qur’ān, too, says: “Believe ye then part of the Book, and deny part?”<sup>15</sup>

Shoghi Effendi’s statement that religious truth is “not absolute, but relative”<sup>16</sup> does not contradict this: It was made not in reference to the claim to validity of revealed truth but rather in refer-

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10 John 14:6.

11 *Aṣ-ṣirāṭu’l-mustaqīm*; *Qur’ān* 1:6; 4:70; 5:15; 37:118; *Tablets of Bahā’u’llāh* 4:8; 5:17; 6:11; 8:3 etc.

12 “*Magga*” (*Anguttara-Nikaya* III, 72), which has also been translated by the “Straight Path” (*Itivuttaka*, Sutta 62), and which is identical with the *Noble Eightfold Path*: right views, right aspirations, right speech, right action, right mode of livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right rapture (*Digha Nikaya* VIII, *Kasapa-Sīhanāda Sutta* [165] 13; cf. H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics*, p. 69ff.).

13 Prologue in Heaven, The Lord [“*Es irrt der Mensch, solang’ er strebt.*”]

14 para 181 (p. 169).

15 2:79.

16 *World Order*, p. 58.

ence to the historical religions whose teachings are “facets of one truth”<sup>17</sup> and to the historical conditions of revelation—to the fact that each dispensation is brought to mankind in accordance with the stage of development, the level of understanding and the capacity of the human race. What is also relative and not absolute is our comprehension of the truth confronting us with its absolute claim to validity, since “man can have no access to absolute truth in the field of religion as in other fields.”<sup>18</sup>

We have to acknowledge the inescapable relativity of all human consciousness: “All human responses to the Absolute, whether conceived of as the Brahman or as God who reveals himself, must be recognized as relative. Divine truth is always received in earthen vessels. How can it be otherwise? No one who is part of a particular community of faith shaped by certain linguistic, social and historical factors, can escape this cultural relativity. The Word must be *heard*, the vision of God must be *seen*, the truth perceived must *become* truth in the life of the believers. People of different cultures at different times respond differently to the mystery of truth.”<sup>19</sup>

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17 Shoghi Effendi, *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*, p. 2.

18 Moojan Momen, “Relativism: A Basis for Bahā’ī Metaphysics,” p. 210. Momen’s essay is a noteworthy contribution with far-reaching implications.

19 Stanley J. Samastha, “Ganga and Galilee: Two Responses to Truth,” p. 103.



## V. Uniqueness, Finality and Exclusivity of Revelation<sup>20</sup>

Claims to absolute truth are nowadays regarded with suspicion. They have been much abused and have caused much harm.<sup>21</sup> In religious history it has been not only for the revealed Scriptures, the Word of God, that claims to absolute truth have been made; but also for certain individuals' understanding of this Word, for often rigidly dogmatic theological interpretations. This fixation of dogmatic definitions has led to claims of finality and exclusivity and to that "confrontation in which each group was concerned to establish the unique superiority of its own tradition."<sup>22</sup> The religion most strongly affected in this respect has been Christianity<sup>23</sup> whose followers for centuries saw

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20 For an interesting contribution on this subject see also Seena Fazel's and Khazeh Fananapazir's essays "A Bahā'ī Approach to the Claim of Exclusivity and Uniqueness in Christianity," in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* 3.2, p. 15ff.; Idem, "A Bahā'ī Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam," in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* 5.3, p. 17ff.

21 This has especially been the case when human perception of truth has been declared absolute and turned into an ideology or ersatz religion, as, for instance, in Nazism and Bolshevism.

22 John Hick, "Religious Diversity as Challenge and Promise," in: J. Hick/H. Askari, *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, p. 4.

23 Hans Küng refers to a "rage for defining" already prevailing in early Christianity, a desire to "dogmatize," i. e., to decree in law, as much as possible in the Christian faith, a tendency which has not been evident in Judaism or Islam. Küng sees this as a Graeco-Roman speciality. The Greek element is the "intellectualization of belief through dogmatizing, high-flown speculation, and sterile, abstract mysticism." The Roman element is the "traditionalism, legalism and triumphalism continually revealed in definitions" (*Christianity and the World Religions*, p. 115). This fateful urge to define has become the cause of continual dogmatic arguments and countless divisions in the Church.

The Christological polemic alone resulted in numerous schisms (*LThK* 7:1288). The Great Schism of 1054 which brought about the secession of the Eastern Church was also primarily the result of dogmatic hair-splitting concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, namely the question as to whether the Holy Ghost emanates from God alone or, as the Western Church asserted, also from the Son, i. e., whether the Western Church had been justified in inserting the word *filioque* into the

in other religions nothing but sources of error, sin and evil. The religions least affected have been Hinduism and Buddhism, in which other religions are acknowledged as being paths to the ultimate truth.

According to the Church, God has revealed himself “once and for all.”<sup>24</sup> Once and for all salvation has come: The claim to finality leads to the claim to exclusivity. The claim to finality relates to the future; the act of salvation has been completed, revelation is at an end. The claim to exclusivity is the demarcation-line against rival offers of salvation; there is no other source of (full) salvation.

1. Jewish doctrine asserts that after Moses, the only human being “whom the Lord knew face to face”<sup>25</sup> and with whom he spoke “mouth to mouth,”<sup>26</sup> there will be no other prophet. His Law is perfect and is neither capable nor in need of improvement. Hence, it is valid for as long as the world will exist. On the basis of this teaching, Moses Maimonides<sup>27</sup> includes as the ninth doctrine in the thirteen articles of the Jewish faith set down in his *Mischne Torah*<sup>28</sup>: “I firmly believe that this Law will not be changed, and that there will not be any other Law given by the Creator, praised be His Name.”<sup>29</sup> In support of his position, Maimonides cites the Torah, whose precepts by its own testimony are “an eternal statute for all your generations.”<sup>30</sup> He refers to the Torah’s explicit commandment “Thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it,”<sup>31</sup> and to the verse “It is not in Heaven.”<sup>32</sup> The lat-

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*Symbolum Nicaeense (a patre filioque procedens)*; cf. *LThK* 4:126ff.; 5:108ff. In Islam (as in Judaism), by contrast, the need for definitions is restricted to the legal sphere; one is interested in orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.

24 cf. for example, Gerhard Rosenkranz, *Die Bahā'ī*, p. 59.

25 Deut. 34:10.

26 Numbers 12:8.

27 1135-1204.

28 “Repetition of the Law,” 1180, published in Hebrew.

29 Quoted in M. Friedlander, *The Jewish Religion*, p. 139.

30 cf. Ex. 28:43; Lev. 6:22; 7:34; 10:9, 15; 16:31; 17:7.

31 Deut. 12:32.

ter means that “the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai,”<sup>33</sup> i. e., that nothing of the Torah was left in Heaven for later revelations: At Mount Sinai, God renounced once and for all his power of legislation.

It is therefore not surprising that the Messiah is not expected to bring a new Law but to be subject to the Law of Moses. His mission will be to lead all mankind to Sinai. This fixation has led to the verdict that was passed on religions not mentioned in the Torah, in particular on Christianity and on Islam, whose respective claims to truth have been disparaged as mere human usurpation.<sup>34</sup> Yet the Jewish faith has never gone so far as to claim exclusivity with regard to salvation. All those who abide by the seven Noachic Laws<sup>35</sup> will be granted salvation. It is stated in the Talmud: “The righteous of all of the nations of the world, everyone of them, have a share in the world to come.”<sup>36</sup> Even the messianic nature of Christianity and of Islam has been acknowledged. The two most eminent thinkers of mediaeval Judaism, Yehuda Halevi and Maimonides, stress that these religions’ “vocation is to help in making the road for the coming of the Kingdom of God” and have

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32 Deut. 30:12.

33 *The Babylonian Talmud*, Baba Mezia 59a/59b.

34 “The mission of the Prophets after Moses is to exhort the people to obey the Law of Moses, and not to make a new religion” (Maimonides, quoted in M. Friedlander, *The Jewish Religion*, p. 218). Rabbi Abraham ben David rejected Jesus’ and Muhammad’s claims to be the bearers of a divine mission, asserting that: “The divinity of the old covenant, or the Torah, has been admitted by both Jesus and Mohammed; we need not prove it. But the Divine authority asserted by them for its abrogation or change is not admitted by us; it must be proved; and since no proof has been given, it must be rejected” (Fifth Principle, ch. II, quoted in M. Friedlander, *ibid.*, p. 220).

35 These consist of six prohibitions and one command. The prohibitions are concerned with blasphemy and idolatry, incest, murder, theft and the mutilation of animals (Gen. 9:1ff.). On the whole subject see Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, p. 123.

36 Sanhedrin 13:21; see also Leo Trepp, “Judaism and the Religions of the World,” p. 46ff.; H. Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 122ff., 328ff.

succeeded in “spreading the word of the Holy Scripture to the ends of the earth.”<sup>37</sup>

2. Referring to certain verses in the New Testament that were interpreted as dogmas of exclusivity and finality,<sup>38</sup> the Church already in its earliest days passed a judgement of condemnation on all who did not belong to it. “*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” was the motto from the time of St. Cyprian onwards. This meant also that there was to be no revelation after Christ: “*Extra ecclesiam nullus propheta*”! The seal was set on revelation for all times since the fullness of salvation had come with Christ. Of all religions, it is the Christian Church that has been most intransigent in its dogmatic proclamation of finality and exclusivity. The origin of this is certainly the Doctrine of the Trinity formulated at the Council of Nicea. This dogma took Christ out of the chain of prophets and divine messengers and elevated him instead to the rank of God (in his second person). This event—the incarnation of God on earth—thus appeared unique, unrepeatable and unsurpassable.

Thus, for many centuries it was the Christian position that all men must become Christians if they are to be saved. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII in his Bull *Unam sanctam* pronounced: “We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic Church; we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins<sup>39</sup>.... the Roman Pontiff is, for every human creature, an utter necessity of salvation.”<sup>40</sup>

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37 Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism*, p. 246.

38 cf. John 1:1, 14; 3:16; 10:30; 12:45; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1. Tim. 2:5; cf. also S. Fazel and K. Fananapazir, “A Bahā’ī Approach to the Claim of Exclusivity and Uniqueness in Christianity,” in: *The Journal of Bahā’ī Studies* 3.2, p. 18ff.

39 Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, no. 468.

40 “*Porro subesse Romano Pontifici omni humanae creaturae declaramus, dicimus, definimus et pronuntiamus omnino de necessitate salutis*” (Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, no. 469).

The verdict condemning all Jews, heathens, unbelievers and heretics was formulated at the Ecumenical Council of Florence in 1442. It stated that: “The Holy Roman Church ... strongly believes, recognizes and announces that no one outside the Catholic Church, neither pagan nor Jew nor unbeliever nor one who is severed from the Church will enjoy eternal life, rather will he die in the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and for his angels, unless he joins the Catholic Church before dying.”<sup>41</sup> The Protestant equivalent of this “has been the firm assumption, not, however, explicitly stated in an article of faith... that outside Christianity there is no salvation. This note is to be heard not only in old missionary statements but also in declarations made within very recent years from the fundamentalist evangelical groups.”<sup>42</sup>

The Church especially felt subject to provocation from two religions: from Judaism, since the Jews had rejected and crucified Christ; and from Islam, on account of the “blasphemous” claim of divine revelation after Christ. It was for this reason that from the beginning the most vehement Christian polemics were directed against the prophet Muḥammad and the faith he founded.

John of Damascus<sup>43</sup> called him a liar-prophet<sup>44</sup> and denigrated Islam as the forerunner of the Antichrist.<sup>45</sup> In Dante’s *La Divina Commedia* the prophet Muḥammad appears as “*seminator di scandalo e di scisma*”, a crime for which he and the Imām ‘Alī are subjected to severe punishment in the ninth hell.<sup>46</sup> When in 1529—a time when Vienna was under threat of Turkish occupa-

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41 Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, no. 714.

42 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 120/121.

43 died circa 750.

44 As late as 1966, A. Spindeler, professor of Catholic moral theology and homiletics in Hildesheim, wrote that Muḥammad “is nothing but a liar prophet... Thus, Muḥammad is and remains a false prophet” (*Katholische Glaubenskorrespondenz*, ed. by the diocesan authorities of Hildesheim, issue 1).

45 Quoted in Gerhard Rosenkranz, *Der christliche Glaube*, p. 151ff.

46 *The Divine Comedy*: “Sowers of scandal and of schism” (Inferno XXVIII, 10-12).

tion—the Arabic text of the Qur’ān was published in Venice, the Pope immediately had the book put to the flame. Venice acquired the nickname “whore of the Turks.”<sup>47</sup>

The foreword written by Theodor Bibliander for the new edition of the Latin translation of the Qur’ān<sup>48</sup> commissioned by Petrus Venerabilis, Abbot of Cluny,<sup>49</sup> is revealing. So, too, is that in the first German edition of the Qur’ān<sup>50</sup> written by David Friedrich Megerlin. In both cases, the editors used the foreword to justify the publication of the book, an undertaking certainly not without its dangers. Bibliander saw it as an indispensable duty to “expose the fraudulence of the heretics. The teachings of Mohammed, which have for almost nine-hundred years held captive the greatest part of the inhabited world, wreaking havoc like a cancerous growth [should not merely be] disproved and rejected [but] strangled and destroyed once and for all.” Megerlin questioned whether the German translation of the Qur’ān he published would not cause “anger and confusion, [since] this book of lies with its denial of Jesus the Mediator and of the Trinity ought instead to be burned and banned, nay rather utterly exterminated, as a falsification of the Holy Scriptures.” The translator disclosed the fact that he personally regarded “Mohammed as the great Antichrist and the Koran as the *Mark of the Beast*<sup>51</sup> and the false prophet.” Megerlin believed the translation of the Qur’ān in its entirety was a good method “of becoming better acquainted with both the Antichrist Mohammed and his book of lies, the Koran, and then asking God soon to put an end to this huge empire and its superstitious religion presented in the Koran.”<sup>52</sup>

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47 Quoted in Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, p. 20.

48 Basel, 1543.

49 Died 1156.

50 Frankfurt 1772. Both forewords are published by Claus Schedl in the appendix to his work *Muhammad und Jesus*.

51 Rev. 16:2; cf. *Some Answered Questions* 11:24-25.

52 Quoted in Schedl, *op. cit.*, p. 570.

This brusque claim to exclusivity with regard to salvation was supported even by the great French mathematician and religious philosopher Blaise Pascal<sup>53</sup> who, while being capable of remarkable depth of thought, also displayed a frightening tendency to narrow-mindedness: “*Dieu par Jésus-Christ*<sup>54</sup>... *Dès lors, je refuse toutes les autres religions*<sup>55</sup>... *Tout homme peut faire ce qu’a fait Mahomet; car il n’a point fait de miracles, il n’a point été prédit; nul homme ne peut faire ce qu’a fait Jésus-Christ.*”<sup>56</sup>

The thinkers of the Reformation, too, shared this viewpoint. Martin Luther wrote: “Apart from Christ there is nothing but sheer idolatry, an idol and a false fiction about God, whether it is called the Law of Moses or the law of the pope or the Koran of the Turk.”<sup>57</sup> In his work *On War against the Turks*<sup>58</sup> (1529), we read that he “read some parts of Mohammed’s Koran”<sup>59</sup> from which he concluded that Islam was “a patchwork of Jewish, Christian and heathen beliefs.”<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, he regarded Muhammad “as a destroyer of our Lord Christ<sup>61</sup> [and believed that his] foul and shameful book<sup>62</sup> [in which] all abominations, all errors, all devils are piled up in one heap<sup>63</sup> [showed to the Christian] how much need there was for prayer, and how he must first smite the Turk’s Allah, that is, his god the devil, and overcome his power and di-

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53 1623–1662.

54 *Pensées* 380 [“We know God only by Jesus Christ,” *Thoughts*, no. 547].

55 *Pensées* 466 [“Therefore I reject all other religions,” *Thoughts*, no. 737].

56 *Pensées* 598 [“Any man can do what Mahomet has done; for he performed no miracles, he was not foretold. No man can do what Christ has done, EQ,” *Thoughts*, no. 600]

57 “Lectures on Galatians” (1535), in: *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, p. 401.

58 in: *Luther’s Works*, vol. 46 (“The Christian in Society” III).

59 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

vinity.”<sup>64</sup> Calvin’s thoughts on the matter were no different from those of Luther.

The polemical exclusivity of the Protestant concept of revelation was upheld until very recently, even though there were other, very different, voices making themselves heard. As late as 1936, Islam was referred to in the journal *Evangelisches Missionsmagazin* as “a particularly dangerous monstrosity from hell.”<sup>65</sup> This position was confirmed by Rudolf Stählin in an encyclopaedia on Christianity published in 1957, where he stated: “Only in Jesus Christ is God Himself really manifested.”<sup>66</sup> He asserted that in other religions only man’s search for God and his attempt to create self-fulfilment of this search<sup>67</sup> was manifested: in other words man was seeking self-redemption.

In recent times, it has been the Swiss theologian Karl Barth who formulated the claim to exclusivity regarding salvation in the most categorical and implacable manner. For him, as for the proponents of dialectical theology, the dominant trend in the post-war era, the other religions are merely the work of man,<sup>68</sup> unbelief;<sup>69</sup> “contradiction to the revelation, the concentrated expression of man’s unbelief;<sup>70</sup> escape to religion, to adoring faith in a congenial higher being.”<sup>71</sup> Barth speaks of the “so-called religions,” which in reality are the “false beliefs in false gods.”<sup>72</sup> He even goes so far as to call the non-Christian religions “the religions of lies”<sup>73</sup> and never tires of emphasizing that there is no relation be-

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64 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

65 p. 375.

66 *Christliche Religion*, Fischer-Lexikon, p. 231.

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Der Römerbrief*, p. 83.

69 *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. I.2, p. 335.

70 *Ibid.* vol. I.2, p. 330.

71 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV.2, p. 456.

72 *Ibid.* vol. IV.3.2, p. 875.

73 *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. I.2, p. 377.



tween Christ and Belial; between light and darkness;<sup>74</sup> between truth and lies; that there is no unity of the Gospel and religion. Instead there can only be unity of religions in the sense that they all lead to destruction.<sup>75</sup>

3. Even Islam, which acknowledges the prior history of salvation in so far as it is testified to in the Qur'ān, and which even acknowledges the existence of divine messengers whose names are not mentioned in the Qur'ān,<sup>76</sup> still saw in the Far Eastern religions of Buddhism and Hinduism—with the exception of a phenomenon such as the Great Moghul Akbar<sup>77</sup>—nothing but idolatry.<sup>78</sup> Islam, too, made a stern and uncompromising claim to finality based on the statement in the Qur'ān that Muḥammad was the “Seal of the Prophets.”<sup>79</sup> The doctrine that revelation ceased with

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74 “What communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial?” (II Cor. 6:14-15).

75 *Ibid.* vol. I.2, p. 356ff.

76 *Qur'ān* 4:165.

77 1542–1605. Cf. note 254.

78 On this subject see also chapter VII, p. 77.

79 *khātamu'n-nabiyyīn*, 33:40. Other verses in the Qur'ān also appear to uphold this view: “This day I have perfected your religion for you” (5:5). “Whoso desireth any other religion than Islam, that religion shall never be accepted from him, and in the next world he shall be among the lost” (3:79). “The true religion with God is Islam” (3:17). However, the hermeneutics of these verses leave open a different interpretation from that of the dogma of the finality of prophethood (on this doctrine cf. Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding Islam*, pp. 57-60). First, one must bear in mind that the Qur'ān uses two terms: *rasūl* (= messenger), and *nabī* (= prophet). *Rasūl* are the founders of the great religions, the divine messengers whom Bahā'u'llāh calls *al-maẓharu'l-ilāhī* (=Manifestations). *Nabī* are those who foretell the future, who announce future events in the history of salvation. Muḥammad, like the Manifestations before him was both *rasūl* and *nabī*. The Qur'ānic verse 33:40 contains both terms: “Muḥammad is not the father of any man among you, but he is the Apostle of God, and the seal of the prophets” (*khātamu'n-nabiyyīn*). Bahā'īs understand from this verse not that revelation has been sealed up, and that no more divine messengers will come, but rather that Muḥammad's revelation marks the end of the prophetic cycle (the universal cycle that started with Adam; cf. chap. XI, 9, p. 141) which has announced and prepared the way for the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. “In this perspective, Muḥammad is the prophet prior to the Last Day, rather than the last prophet in a temporal sense” (Seena

the advent of Muḥammad is central to the teachings of orthodox Islam, and one which is held to by Muslims of all sects. Hence, the Muslims, too, believe that the fullness of salvation has been granted through the coming of Muḥammad.

Mediaeval theologians, philosophers and historians justified this claim to finality with the argument that the evolution of religion had reached its culmination in Islam; and that Islam was the most adequate, the most perfect religion, as evidenced in its teachings.<sup>80</sup> Modern Islamic thinkers regard a new revelation as superfluous, since through Islam man has reached maturity and the guidance provided in the Qur'ān corresponds to his level of development.<sup>81</sup>

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Fazel/Khazeh Fananapazir, "A Bahā'ī Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam," in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* 5.3, p. 29). This is why the Bāb revealed: "When God sent forth His Prophet Muḥammad, on that day the termination of the prophetic cycle was foreordained in the knowledge of God" (*Selections* 6:11:5). To interpret the "perfection" of religion of which the Qur'ān speaks (5:5) as the ending of all revelation is neither cogent nor perceptive. It is Muḥammad's message that has been perfected. The other verses are easily understood from the Qur'ānic terminology: the term "Islam" is not confined to the revelation of Muḥammad, it is the one, indivisible religion of God which was proclaimed by all prophets (cf. chap. VII, p. 77). After all, the Qur'ān clearly rejects the Jewish claims that on Sinai all revelation was completed (5:69). For further details see Fazel and Fananapazir, in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* 5.3, p. 17ff).

80 Mawdudi (*Towards Understanding Islam*, p. 57ff.) shares this viewpoint. In five pages of his book he takes great pains to justify this doctrine with rational proofs. His reasoning shows the weakness of the basis on which the doctrine of the finality of prophethood stands.

81 cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, p. 81. Rahman appreciates, however, that modern man is afflicted with moral confusion and that his moral consciousness has not kept pace with his technical progress. Since man will, in the future as in the past, still be in need of divine guidance he should look for it in the holy books, especially in the Qur'ān, and make use of it directly, i. e., without the mediation of human religious authorities. Rahman sees the finality of Muḥammad's mission also confirmed historically, because—he believes—no other world religion has come into being after Islam: "Not that there have been no claimants, but there have been no successful claimants" (p. 81).

According to the doctrines of Shī‘a Islam, the saviour expected in the Last Days, who is associated with the names<sup>82</sup> *al-Mahdī* (The Rightly-Guided One), *al-Qā’im* (He Who will arise), *Ṣaḥibu’z-Zamān* (The Lord of the Age), *Ṣaḥibu’l-Amr* (The Lord of Command), *al-Imām al-Muntaẓar* (The Awaited Imam), *al-Ḥujja* (The Proof), will not be a prophet or messenger of God. He will be solely a restorer of Islam whose mission it will be to make the Qur’ān known throughout the world, establish Qur’ānic law everywhere and “fill the earth with equity and justice.”<sup>83</sup> He will bring neither a new Book nor a new law from God. This is strongly reminiscent of the Jewish understanding of the nature of the Messiah. Although the Qur’ān foretells for the day of judgement, “when mankind shall stand before the Lord of all Being<sup>84</sup>... a book distinctly written, witnessed by those brought nigh,”<sup>85</sup> those theologians who proposed that the *Qā’im* will rise with a new authority, a new Book and a new religious law (*Sharī‘a*)<sup>86</sup> were subject to criticism from Shī‘a traditionalists.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, when the Bāb appeared, it was not only his claim to be the long-awaited salvation figure of the Last Days that provoked such violent reaction. Above all, it was his assertion that he was the Primal Point,<sup>88</sup> i. e., a revealer of the Divine Word, a Manifestation of God, bearing a new Law abrogating that of the Qur’ān,

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82 cf. Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam*, pp. 45, 165. On p. 168 an enumeration of the specific signs of the *Mahdī* is given.

83 *Ḥadīth*, quoted in I. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 198; cf. also *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, “Al-Mahdi,” p. 312.

84 83:6.

85 83:20.

86 cf. Moojan Momen, *op. cit.*, p. 169 no 6.

87 cf. Fazel and Fananapazir, “A Bahā’ī Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam,” in: *The Journal of Bahā’ī Studies* 5.3, p. 30 ff.

88 *Nuqtatu’l-ūlā*. In his Epistle to Muḥammad Shāh, the Bāb revealed: “I am the Primal Point from which have been generated all created things. I am the Countenance of God, Whose splendour can never be obscured” (*Selections* 1:4:4; cf. also *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 279 (p. 252); *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 141 [p. 88]).

the *Sharī'a*. It was this claim—one which contradicted the eschatological expectations of traditional Islamic doctrine—that attracted the unmitigated hatred of the orthodox clergy. The merciless persecution of the Bābīs and Bahā'īs in Iran; the massacres that took place in the nineteenth century and the bloody persecutions that endure to this day; the brutal suppression of the Bahā'ī community under the Ayatollah's regime all find their theological justification in this dogma of finality.<sup>89</sup> Anyone who professes faith in the new Revelation is guilty of apostasy<sup>90</sup> and, according to the law of the *Sharī'a*, has forfeited his life as a renegade.<sup>91</sup>

## VI. Practical Intolerance as a Consequence of Dogmatic Intolerance

This claim to exclusivity and superiority, in which one's own religion is regarded as *a priori* better than others; this self-righteous, narrow-minded dogmatism that easily slips into fanaticism and whose roots are to be found in such vices as arro-

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89 cf. Douglas Martin, "The Persecution of the Bahā'īs of Iran 1844-1984," in: *Bahā'ī Studies* 12/13, Ottawa, 1984; cf. also the confidential document of the Secretary of the Supreme Revolutionary Council, Dr. Seyyed Mohammed Golpaygani of 25 February 1991, signed by the State President 'Alī Khamenei, in which the status of the Bahā'īs within the country's system is described. In this document we read: "The Government's dealing with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked." In this paper there is also a plan advocated "to confront and to destroy their cultural roots outside the country" (published, together with the Persian text, in: *World Order*, Fall 1993, pp. 46). As to the theological reasons of these persecutions see Payam Akhavan, "Implications of Twelver Shī'ih Miḥdīsm on Religious Tolerance: The Case of the Bahā'ī Minority in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in: Vogt, Kari/Tore Lindholm (eds.), *Islamic Law Reform and Human Rights. Challenges and Rejoinders*, Copenhagen: Scandinavian University Press, 1993.

90 *rida*.

91 *murtadd* (cf. *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p. 413). In the *Qur'ān* (16:106) the apostate is threatened with punishment in the next world only. In the *fiqh* there is unanimity that the male apostate must be put to death.

gance, pride, and envy, attitudes which are condemned in all religions as sin or even mortal sin; this blindness to the faith, feelings and thinking of others in whose beliefs one sees only unbelief and superstition<sup>92</sup>: all these attitudes have always been the primary cause of the demise of religion. They also have constituted the rationale for inflicting untold suffering upon people in the name of religion, for persecution, repression, deportation and mass-murder. This distorted representation of religion by theologians has caused “disapproval, contempt, disputes and hatred [to arise among the peoples]... They teach their followers to believe that their own form of religion is the only one pleasing to God, and that followers of any other persuasion are condemned by the All-Loving Father and deprived of His Mercy and Grace.”<sup>93</sup>

Hatred is never so profound and irreconcilable; envy never so wretched and wars so merciless and cruel as when their motives spring from the deepest levels of consciousness, from religious belief: “*Jamais on ne fait le mal si pleinement et si gaiement que quand on le fait par conscience*” writes Pascal.<sup>94</sup> The forced baptisms of Jews in the Middle Ages; the Crusades and holy wars; the pogroms against the Jews; the displacement and extermination of Jews and Muslims under the Spanish Inquisition; the European religious wars resulting from the Reformation right up to the present-day conflicts in Northern Ireland; or in Punjab, Sudan, Algeria and Lebanon, where people commit the most despicable atrocities while having the watchwords of Islam on their lips;<sup>95</sup> and last but not least the bloody persecutions of the Bahā’is in Iran by a

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92 cf. Gerhard Schweizer, *Ungläubig sind die anderen. Weltreligionen zwischen Toleranz und Fanatismus*, Stuttgart 1990.

93 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Paris Talks* 13:2.

94 *Pensées* 813 (“Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction,” *Thoughts* no. 895).

95 “*Allāhu-Akbar!*,” “*Bismi’llāhi’r-Raḥmāni’r-Raḥīm!*” (“God is greater!,” “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful”).

clerical, obscurantist regime<sup>96</sup>: all these are consequences of claims to exclusivity and finality, and consequences of an intolerance in which, according to the historian Arnold Toynbee, the majority of official representatives of Christian theology and the Church see a necessity and glory of Christian doctrine<sup>97</sup>: *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum!*<sup>98</sup>

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, “fanaticism and unreasoning religious zeal” are one of the principal reasons why “people of other religions have shunned and failed to become converted to the Faith of God.”<sup>99</sup> Fanaticism—the perverted form of one of the most exalted virtues, steadfastness<sup>100</sup> in the Cause of God<sup>101</sup>—is the worst deformation of religion. It is even worse than hypocrisy. For that reason it is rigorously denounced in the Bahā’ī Scripture:

Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction.<sup>102</sup>

The people responsible for this dogmatism and fanaticism have always been the clergy, the “blind guides” as Christ called them,<sup>103</sup> who “shut up the kingdom of heaven against men;” who do not enter the kingdom themselves and do not let in

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96 cf. footnote 89.

97 F. Heiler, “The History of Religions as a Preparation,” in: M. Eliade, *The History of Religions*, p. 136.

98 Lucretian (the Roman poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus, 97–55 B. C.), *De rerum naturae (On the Nature of Things)* I, 101: “To such evils could religion persuade mankind!” A harsh criticism of this attitude in the history of religion can be found in Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Book three, division two) p. 122.

99 *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 53. The Faith of God evidently refers here to Islam.

100 *al-istiqāma*.

101 *Gleanings* 134:1; 161:1; 66:11; *The Hidden Words*, Arabic 48.

102 *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, 19 (p. 14).

103 Matt. 23:16, 19, 24.

those who wish to enter;<sup>104</sup> “whom God causeth wilfully to err”<sup>105</sup> and who “repel believers from the way of God;”<sup>106</sup> “who are wrapt in the densest veils of learning;”<sup>107</sup> and who “in the valley of ignorance and pride, are lost in the wilds of remoteness”<sup>108</sup>.

Leaders of religion, in every age, have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp. Some for the lust of leadership, others through want of knowledge and understanding, have been the cause of the deprivation of the people.<sup>109</sup>

And yet there have been remarkable attempts by theologians to overcome dogmatism and the delusion of exclusivity, and to develop a more conciliatory, a more understanding attitude. Before examining this aspect, however, let us turn our attention to the positions adopted by the various religions with respect to prior religious traditions.

## VII.

### The Attitude Towards Past Traditions

Religions do not come into being in a religious and cultural vacuum. Neither Judaism nor Buddhism, neither Christianity nor Islam, nor the Bahā’ī Faith, appeared in a *creatio ex nihilo*, a sudden creation from nothing. Each stands in its own specific

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104 Matt. 23:13-14.

105 *Qur’ān* 45:22.

106 *Qur’ān* 3:99.

107 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 237 (p. 213).

108 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 14 (p. 14).

109 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 15 (p. 15).

historical context, within a tradition which was taken as the starting point by the founder of each religion. The faith of Moses looked back to the prophets Noah and Abraham, Jesus refers again and again to the Scriptures, the testimony of the Jewish prophets known as the Old Testament. As early as the second and third centuries, Christian theologians<sup>110</sup> made reference to the whole of the previous history of salvation as depicted in the Bible, seeing it as a *praeparatio evangelica*, a preparation for the Gospel. Using the principle of *lógos spermatikós*, they even included the pagan philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus in this process, regarding them as teachers preparing mankind for the coming of Christ. Indeed, Augustine wrote: “For what is now called the Christian religion existed even among the ancients and was not lacking from the beginning of the human race until ‘Christ came in the flesh.’ From that time, true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian.”<sup>111</sup>

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam also has a typological understanding of the history of salvation. It is seen as a continuous revelation from God through his prophets and messengers, from Adam, Noah and Abraham, to the Jewish prophets and Jesus: “Say ye: ‘We believe in God, and that which hath been sent down to us, and that which hath been sent down to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes: and that which hath been given to Moses and to Jesus, and that which was given to the prophets from their Lord. No difference do we make between any of them: and to God are we resigned.’”<sup>112</sup> To the Jews and Christians, who are disunited but who both reject the new revelation, the Qur’ān says:

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110 Justin, Clemens Alexandrinus, Origenes.

111 *The Retractations* I,12,3.

112 *Qur’ān* 2:130.



To every one of you have we given a rule and a beaten track. And if God had pleased He had surely made you all one people; but He would test you by what He hath given to each. Be emulous, then, in good deeds. To God shall ye all return, and He will tell you concerning the subjects of your disputes.<sup>113</sup>

The frequent enumeration of the chain of past prophets in the Qur'ān resembles a *basso ostinato*, a term used in music theory to denote the continual recurrence of a theme with constantly changing counterpoints.

In fact, the history of salvation is even more far-reaching than would appear from the sequence of salvation figures named in the Qur'ān. The same book mentions that God has sent “to every people an apostle” and has called all nations to the Straight Path.<sup>114</sup> In another Sūra we read that “every people hath its guide.”<sup>115</sup> According to the teachings of the Qur'ān there is in reality only one indivisible religion, which is intermittently revealed and renewed by God's messengers: *Islam*. Hence, this term refers not merely to Muḥammad, but is used in a general sense whereby even Noah,<sup>116</sup> Abraham,<sup>117</sup> Jacob,<sup>118</sup> Joseph,<sup>119</sup> Moses<sup>120</sup> and the disciples of Jesus<sup>121</sup> appear in the Qur'ān as Muslims, that is, as upright believers who have submitted themselves to the Will of God.<sup>122</sup> The orientalist Frederick M. Denny has described the Qur'ānic paradigm of salvation history in this way:

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113 *Qur'ān* 5:52-53.

114 *Qur'ān* 16:36.

115 *Qur'ān* 13:7.

116 *Qur'ān* 10:73.

117 *Qur'ān* 3:60.

118 *Qur'ān* 2:126ff.

119 *Qur'ān* 12:102.

120 *Qur'ān* 10:84; 7:122.

121 *Qur'ān* 5:111.

122 cf. 3:60; 3:89.

So Muhammad connects his people horizontally and humanly with the past back to Abraham, and vertically in the present with God in a direct relationship. This is a real *Heilsgeschichte* which shows forth God's relations with his creatures as a continuing theme down through the generations. That is, God brings the same truth and guidance always, but humans pervert it and refuse it and go astray ('but if they turn away, it is they who are in schism')<sup>123, 124</sup>.

It is in this way, then, and not in the sense of exclusivity with regard to salvation—as Muslims assume—that we are to understand the verse “The true religion with God is Islam.”<sup>125</sup>

Such an approach opens wide the door for a loving appreciation of other religious traditions which, even if not in their specific current form then at least in their origin, can be regarded as part of salvation history as a whole. Thus, in Islam the entire prior history of the prophets is considered to be a preparation for the coming of Muhammad, in whom this history is brought to its fulfilment and perfection. This concept of salvation history had far-reaching practical consequences:

The followers of other prophetic religions were not forced to become Muslims. The Qur'ān contains the following instruction as to how to treat them:

Verily, they who believe, and the Jews, and the Sabeites, and the Christians: whoever of them believeth in God and in the last day, and does what is right, on them shall come no fear, neither shall they be put to grief.<sup>126</sup>

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123 *Qur'ān* 2:131.

124 *Ethics and the Qur'ān*, p. 110.

125 *Qur'ān* 3:17.

126 5:73; see also 2:59.

The People of the Book<sup>127</sup>—according to the restrictive interpretation of orthodox theology, the Jews and the Christians only—were not only tolerated, they were placed under the protection of Islam. They are the *ahl adh-dhimmāh*.<sup>128</sup> Oppression of them was condemned as a sinful excess. There are *aḥādīth* according to which the prophet Muḥammad said: “Whoever oppresses one of the *dhimmī* and lays upon him burdens that are too heavy, to him will I myself appear as an accuser on the day of judgement,” “Whoever does any wrong to a Jew or a Christian will have me as an accuser.”<sup>129</sup> This genuine spirit of religious tolerance,<sup>130</sup> which has been expressed in the Qur’ān,<sup>131</sup> was darkened in the course of history by narrow-minded zealots such as the Ḥanbalites<sup>132</sup> and the Shī‘ite lawyers.<sup>133</sup> It is also due to the illiberal attitude of the orthodox ‘ulamā’ that the circle of the *dhimmī* was limited exclusively to the Jews and Christians, although the Qur’ān tells us explicitly that we have

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127 *ahl al-Kitāb*.

128 See *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, “*dhimmāh*,” p. 75ff.

129 Quoted from Emile Dermenghem, *The Life of Mahomet*, p. 331.

130 For more details on this subject see my contribution *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, p. 150ff., 154-162.

131 “Let there be no compulsion in religion” (2:257; see also 10:99-100; 50:45-46).

132 One of the four recognized orthodox schools of Islamic law (*madhāhib*), founded by Aḥmad Ibn-Ḥanbal (d. 241/1855), which occupies “an extreme position with respect to the zealous observance of the *Sunna*” (I. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 49) and which is characterized by “a thorough-going rigidity” and an “intolerant attitude” (*Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p. 21).

133 As to Shī‘a Islam I. Goldziher writes: “On examining the legal documents we find that the Shī‘i legal positions toward other faiths is much harsher and stiffer than that taken by Sunni Muslims. Their law reveals a heightened intolerance to people of other beliefs” (p. 213). This is also demonstrated by the Shī‘ite concept of “impurity” (*najāsa*): Whereas according to the Qur’ān only the idolaters (*mushrikūn*) are declared unclean (“only they who join Gods are unclean,” 9:28), the Shī‘ite law includes all non-Muslims, even the *ahl al-Kitāb* (cf. *Qur’ān* 3:70; 3:71; 3:99), the “People of the Book,” with the result that touching of an unbeliever is listed among the ten sins that produce *najāsa*, ritual impurity (cf. I. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 213).

no exhaustive list of Messengers sent by God to the various peoples.<sup>134</sup> Thus, neither Far Eastern religions nor other traditions were included in the recorded history of salvation. Even Zarathustra, who is not expressly mentioned in the Qur'ān,<sup>135</sup> has posed a problem to Muslim theologians.<sup>136</sup>

In conclusion, it may be stated without doubt that the prophetic religions have seen in their predecessors part of an evolutionary process in which truth is revealed ever more fully. In each case, however, believers have then gone on to assert that this process of progressive revelation ended with the founder of their respective religion and closed the door on future dispensations. Thus, the promise of salvation at the time of the return of Christ,<sup>137</sup> the Day of Resurrection,<sup>138</sup> the Great News<sup>139</sup> and the Day of Severance,<sup>140</sup> which might be associated with a new outpouring of the divine Spirit, is dismissed as impossible.

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134 40:78; 4:165. Muhammad Talbi calls this restrictive interpretation “dubious” (“A Community of Communities: The Right to be Different and the Ways of Harmony,” p. 82).

135 In a letter not yet published in translation, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā answered the question why the name Zarathustra did not appear in the Qur’ān by referring to verses 25:40 and 50:12, where mention is made of “...those who dwelled at Rass.” He explained that “Rass” means Aras (Araxes), and that this was a reference to Zarathustra (cf. Marzieh Gail, *Six Lessons on Islam*, p. 14).

136 cf. *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, “*Madjūs*,” pp. 298-300.

137 Matt. 24ff.; II Peter 3:10, 13; Rev. 16:15, 3:2.

138 *Yaumu’l-qiyāmah*; cf. *Qur’ān* 2:79, 107, 169; 3:70; 16:94; 22:17; 29:12, 25; 32:25; 39:67; 45:25; 75:6 etc. See also footnote 472.

139 *an-naba’ al-‘azīm* (*Qur’ān* 78:2).

140 *yaum al-faḍl* (*Qur’ān* 78:17; 37:20; 44:40; 77:14). *Faḍl* also implies division, separation, reckoning.

## VIII. Promoters of Tolerance, Dialogue and the Unity of Religions

The narrow-minded dogmatic separation of one's own religion from others, the assumption of the superiority of one's religion or its founder and the condemnation of all rival claims to salvation were until recently the dominant attitudes throughout the world. Tolerance and religious freedom were not won as a result of struggle by the Church, but rather against its embittered opposition. "No freedom for error!" was the motto devised by Cardinal Ottaviani and fought for by resistance forces within the Catholic Church as late as the Second Vatican Council in 1965. It is to the Western Enlightenment that we owe the fact that religious freedom is now constitutionally laid down and protected in all constitutional states. The Catholic Church did not acknowledge this basic right until the Second Vatican Council.<sup>141</sup>

Yet there have always been individuals in the Church who have broken through this one-sidedness and, contrary to official doctrine, pleaded for understanding and tolerance. As early as the twelfth century Petrus Venerabilis,<sup>142</sup> who had met Muslims in Spain, condemned the terrible deeds perpetrated against the Muslims in the first Crusade and demanded that Christians study the Muslims' religion from its sources and seek to convert them in a spirit of Christian love.<sup>143</sup> The first Latin translation of the Qur'ān, which he commissioned, was published before the second Crusade in 1143.<sup>144</sup>

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141 in its *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions*.

142 cf. above p. 68.

143 Rosenkranz, *Der christliche Glaube*, p. 151.

144 In his letter to Bernard of Clairvaux enclosed with the new translation of the Qur'ān he refers to Islam, whether out of conviction or for the sake of caution, as

In his book *De pace seu concordantia fidei*<sup>145</sup> published in 1453, Nicolaus of Kues (Cusanus, 1401–1464), a Cardinal of the Catholic Church who was strongly influenced by the mystic writings of Meister Eckhart and sought reconciliation above all else, presented the view, sensational for the time, that all religions, however varied their rites, were based on one common faith.<sup>146</sup> This understanding enabled him to reach a deeper appreciation of the prophet Muhammad.

The Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) also succeeded in breaking out of the entrenched and arrogant official dogmatism of the Church. In his speeches<sup>147</sup> he embraced the entire diversity of the non-Christian religions and praised the unity of all religions, arguing that “The further you progress in the subject of religion, the more the whole religious world necessarily appears as an indivisible whole.”<sup>148</sup> Proceeding from a general concept of religion, he came to define religion as the sense of utter dependence, a definition that bears a remarkable resemblance to the literal meaning of the word “Islam.”

In this context mention should also be made of the Swedish Lutheran Archbishop Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), likewise an outstanding scholar of religious studies, who declared on his deathbed that “God lives, I can prove it by the history of relig-

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“an evil, ominous heresy of Machumet,” an “error that surpasses all errors,” the “scum of all heresies in which are brought together the remnants of all the devilish sects that have arisen since the coming of the Saviour”; he complains that “almost half the earth is infected with this deadly plague” (quoted in Claus Schedl, *Muhammad und Jesus*—the appendix (p. 567) contains a German translation of this letter).

145 [“On the peace of Faith.”]

146 German edition: *Über den Frieden im Glauben*, ed. Ernst Hoffmann, Leipzig 1943, chap. 1, 114. French edition: Nicolas de Cues, *La Paix de la Foi* (Extraits), in: *Oeuvres choisies de Nicolas de Cues*, Paris: Aubier, 1942.

147 *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers* (1799).

148 Fourth speech.

ion.”<sup>149</sup> He expounded this principle in his posthumously published work *The Living God, Basal Forms of Personal Religion*.<sup>150</sup> Another noteworthy theologian, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), author of *The Idea of the Holy*,<sup>151</sup> a book published in numerous editions and languages. In 1921 Otto founded the *Religiöser Menschheitsbund*<sup>152</sup> with the aim of reducing interreligious distrust and hatred. After World War II this organization was affiliated under the name *Weltbund der Religionen* with the World Congress of Faiths.

The extent to which the *Zeitgeist*<sup>153</sup> was imbued with the idea of the unity of religions is demonstrated by the *World Parliament of Religions* held in Chicago in 1893 in association with the World Exhibition. This event, which also saw the first public presentation of the religion of Bahā’u’llāh,<sup>154</sup> marked the beginning of the modern era of interfaith relations.<sup>155</sup> The initiators of this *World Parliament of Religions* were “seized with the spirit of understanding among the nation’s true religions.”<sup>156</sup> This spirit was reflected in the words of welcome by which the Parliament was addressed:

This day the sun of a new era of religious peace and progress rises over the world, dispelling the dark clouds of sectarian strife. This day a new flower blossoms in the gardens of reli-

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149 Quoted in Friedrich Heiler, “The History of Religions as a Preparation,” p. 135.

150 The Gifford Lectures, delivered at the University of Edinburgh in the year 1931, London: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1933.

151 6th impression, revised with additions, London-Edinburgh: Oxford University Press, 1931. Original German edition: *Das Heilige*, Berlin 1917.

152 [Religious Federation of Mankind].

153 Lit. “the spirit of the time,” the moral and intellectual trend of a given period.

154 cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 256.

155 cf. Karl-Josef Kuschel, “The Parliament of the World’s Religions, 1893-1993,” in: H. Küng/K.-J. Kuschel (eds.), *A Global Ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions*, p. 77.

156 Karl-Josef Kuschel, “The Parliament of the World’s Religions, 1893-1993,” in: H. Küng/K.-J. Kuschel (eds.), *A Global Ethic*, p. 79.

gious thought, filling the air with its exquisite perfume. This day a new fraternity is born into the world of human progress, to aid in the upbuilding of the kingdom of God in the hearts of men. Era and flower and fraternity bear one name. It is a name which will gladden the hearts of those who worship God and love man in every clime. Those who hear its music joyfully echo it back to sun and flower. *It is the brotherhood of religions.*<sup>157</sup>

Although the turn of the century was not yet the time for really coming to terms with the plurality of religions,<sup>158</sup> this spirit also influenced such representatives of liberal Protestantism as Ernst Troeltsch and Friedrich Heiler,<sup>159</sup> as well as the philosopher Savarpalli Radhakrishnan and the British historian Arnold Toynbee.

Heiler was a passionate advocate of interfaith understanding and co-operation. Filled with compassion for “a torn humanity which has passed through so many catastrophes ... which is still bleeding from so many wounds,”<sup>160</sup> he worked ceaselessly in the

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157 C. C. Bonney, “Words of Welcome,” in: R. H. Seager (ed.), *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, p. 21ff.

158 Although the initiators of the 1893 Parliament were concerned about demonstrating the plurality of religions with equal rights and equal status; and although the spirit of understanding among nations prevailed in the heads of the participants, a Christianity-centred world view was still dominant in the world: “In their hearts the Christian churches still hoped that they would be the beneficiaries of the process of modernity. For with the globalization and universalization of technology, economics and industry, Christianity seemed to have the best prospects of establishing itself as a universal religion” (K.-J. Kuschel, *op. cit.*, p. 85). What the Christian churches actually had in mind became apparent at the World Missionary Conference of Protestant missionary societies that took place in 1910 in Edinburgh, and that saw Christianity “as having a unique historical opportunity. In almost apocalyptic language they enthused about the ‘uniqueness of the historical moment,’ which lay in the fact that the Christianization of the whole world could be expected within a space of only ten years” (*ibid.*).

159 1892–1967.

160 *The History of Religions as a Preparation*, p. 158.



cause of interreligious dialogue. Like Rudolf Otto he observed the many parallels between Christianity and other religions, remarking that “one really must say that there is no religious concept, no dogmatic teaching, no ethical command, no churchly institution, no ritual form and practice of piety in Christianity which does not have diverse parallels in non-Christian religions.”<sup>161</sup> By no means does he overlook the obvious differences in religions, but he nonetheless affirms that: “Important as these differences may be, they are overarched by an ultimate unity,”<sup>162</sup> since all the religions teach “the way to God” and “at the same time the way to one’s neighbour as well.”<sup>163</sup> The Bahā’īs are particularly indebted to Friedrich Heiler. In an expert opinion dated 4 December 1961 relating to the persecution of Bahā’īs in Turkey, he gave emphatic support to the position that the Bahā’ī Faith is not a sect, especially not one of Islam. Rather, it is a universal religion *equal in status* to that of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity.<sup>164</sup>

Savarpalli Radhakrishnan—one of the most highly educated and knowledgeable scholars in the field of religious studies, professor at Oxford, ambassador in Moscow and ultimately President of India—acknowledged that nothing serves the cause of world peace better than the overcoming of dogmatic claims to exclusivity, the establishment of fraternal understanding among religions and the recognition of the latent mystic unity of all religions. He was convinced that all religions are paths to the Eternal One, Who has manifested himself to believers under different names and aspects. Beyond the rites, dogmas and a necessarily inadequate sym-

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161 *Ibid.* p. 139.

162 *Ibid.* p. 142ff.

163 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

164 cf. Udo Schaefer, *The Bahā’ī Faith: Sect or Religion?*, p. 17 .

symbolism, he saw the one religion of the Spirit, from which could be born a renewed belief in God.<sup>165</sup>

Arnold Toynbee, neither a theologian nor a scholar of religious studies but an historian with a commitment to Christianity, called for the religions to put aside their deep-rooted differences and stand together to face “a fearful common adversary: a revival of the worship of collective human power.”<sup>166</sup> In their attitude towards evil,<sup>167</sup> in their approach to the “problem of suffering,”<sup>168</sup> in their conviction that the true destiny of man is to bring himself into harmony<sup>169</sup> with God, the absolute reality, Toynbee saw the common foundation of all religions; compared with which “the issues that divide them seem secondary.”<sup>170</sup> This meant that “retaining one’s convictions is not incompatible with abandoning a traditional attitude of rivalry and hostility towards people whose convictions differ from one’s own.”<sup>171</sup> Toynbee, who saw a promising future for the Bahā’ī Faith and considered the nine-sided House of Worship in Wilmette symbolic,<sup>172</sup> was of the opinion that “if God loved mankind [it would seem unlikely] that He would not have made other revelations to other people as well.”<sup>173</sup> He believed Christians should acknowledge that other religions have also come from God and that each has presented some facet of God’s truth; and should recognize that “they too are light radiating from the same source from which our own religion derives its spiritual light.”<sup>174</sup> He was convinced that Christians today

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165 cf. S. Radhakrishnan, *Recovery of Faith*, London 1956.

166 *Christianity Among the Religions of the World*, p. 85.

167 *Ibid.* p. 21ff.

168 *Ibid.* p. 24ff.

169 *Ibid.* p. 81.

170 *Ibid.* p. 81.

171 *Ibid.* p. 82.

172 *Ibid.* p. 104.

173 *Ibid.* p. 96.

174 *Ibid.* p. 100.

could face the future with confidence, if they faced it with charity and humility, without fanaticism, arrogance, self-centredness or pride;<sup>175</sup> and if they took to heart the words of the Roman city prefect and spokesman of the Senate, Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, in a petition to Bishop Ambrosius of Milan,<sup>176</sup> calling for the preservation of an altar in the Senate that had been consecrated by Augustus: “It is impossible that so great a mystery should be approached by *one* road only.”<sup>177</sup>

The new orientation for the Catholic Church established at the Second Vatican Council was undoubtedly of epochal significance. In the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*<sup>178</sup> it was conceded that in other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism there was to be found “a certain recognition of that hidden power which is present in history and human affairs, and in fact sometimes an acknowledgement of a supreme Godhead...”<sup>179</sup> The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She has a sincere respect for those ways of acting and living, those moral and doctrinal teachings which may differ in many respects from what she holds and teaches, but which none the less often reflect the brightness of that Truth which is the light of all men.”<sup>180</sup>

The Declaration also includes respectful comments about Islam. The Muslims are regarded with esteem because they endeavour to submit themselves to God’s “mysterious decrees. They venerate Jesus as a prophet, without, however, recognizing him as God, and they pay honour to his virgin mother Mary...; they expect a day of judgement” and “attach importance to the moral life

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175 *Ibid.* p. 111.

176 died 397.

177 Toynbee, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

178 *De ecclesia habitudine ad religiones non-christianas*. English edition: London (Catholic Truth Society) 1966.

179 *Declaration*, p. 3 (no. 2).

180 *Ibid.* p. 4 (no 2).

and worship God, mainly by prayer, alms-giving and fasting.”<sup>181</sup> What is significant is above all the admonishment “to forget the past, to make sincere efforts at mutual understanding and to work together in protecting and promoting for the benefit of all men, social justice, good morals as well as peace and freedom.”<sup>182</sup>

However, the Church still holds fast to the view that people can find the fullness of their religious life only in Jesus Christ, who is “the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6).”<sup>183</sup> In comparison with earlier dogmatic statements the Vatican II pronouncements are, as John Hick states, “magnificently open and charitable. The emotional climate has changed, and has changed radically and for the better; and there can be no question that these new pronouncements represent a major step forward. But still Vatican II has not made the Copernican revolution that is needed in the Christian attitude to other faiths.”<sup>184</sup> What the Church has relinquished is its hitherto intransigent attitude of condemnation towards all non-Christian religions. It is, however, far from seeing outpourings of divine revelation in these religions. They are, at best, regarded as evidence of man’s quest for God—“even if only in shadows and images.” Everything which is found to be “good and true in the religion” is considered “preparation for the Glad Tidings.”<sup>185</sup> The phrase devised by the Church Fathers whereby

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181 Declaration, p. 4ff. (no. 3).

182 *Ibid.* p. 5 (no. 3).

183 *Ibid.* p. 4 (no. 2).

184 *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 126.

185 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 843 with reference to the Council Decree *Lumen gentium*, dated 21 November 1964, no. 16. This attitude is also evident from a statement of Pope John Paul II in his recent book, based on an interview with a journalist (French edition: *Entrez dans l’espérance*, livre-entretien de Jean Paul II avec le journaliste Vittorio Messori, Paris: Mame-Plon, 1994) in which he places the prophet Muhammad and the Buddha on an equal level with the philosopher Socrates, and in which he assigns to Jesus Christ the unique station above all the other founders of the great religions: “*Le Christ n’est pas un ‘sage’ comme Socrate, ni un ‘prophète’ comme Mahomet, ni un ‘illuminé’ comme Bouddha. Le Dieu fait homme des chrétiens n’a rien de commun avec celui des musulmans,*

there is no salvation outside the Church<sup>186</sup> has not been rescinded but merely modified by stating that “those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and the Church” are exempted from this verdict.<sup>187</sup>

The fact that we are now living in a global society in which technology permits much greater mobility than was previously possible, and the fact that huge migrations have come about due to wars, persecution and poverty in many parts of the world, means that the borders established on the basis of religion have gradually become blurred. The earth has become a communicational unity through radio and television, mass tourism and mass publications. People have become vividly aware of the plurality of faiths. Thus, the religions no longer exist separated from one another in distant continents: They exist very close together—and now find themselves confronted by an urgent necessity for an interfaith dialogue.<sup>188</sup> Such a dialogue presupposes that one endeavour “to un-

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*‘resté étranger au monde,’ ni avec Bouddha qui le fuit. Le pape sait la menace de ‘relativisme’ qui pèse sur le christianisme (toutes les religions ne se valent-elles pas?), notamment l’attraction pour les techniques de méditation et d’ascèse des disciplines orientales, celles du new age et des gnoses nouvelles. Il en démonte un à un les dangers et propose comme alternative la mystique chrétienne qui, elle, repose sur une attitude positive envers le monde et une volonté de le transformer”* (quoted from a review of Henri Tinco, *Le Monde*, 18 October 1994).

186 “*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus.*” This phrase corresponds to the assumption of the nineteenth-century Protestant missionary movement: outside Christianity no salvation. On Christian exclusivism see John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 29ff.; *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 31ff.

187 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (quoted from the German edition, *Katechismus der Katholischen Kirche*, München-Wien 1993) no. 847 with reference to the Council Decree *Lumen gentium* no. 16. This formula is still very close to the allocution of Pope Pius IX. in 1854: “It must... be held as a matter of faith, that outside the Apostolic Roman Church no one can be saved, that the Church is the only arc of salvation, and that whoever does not enter it will perish in the flood. On the other hand, it must likewise be held as certain that those who are affected by ignorance of true religion, if it is invincible ignorance, are not subject to any guilt in this matter before the eyes of the Lord” (quoted from Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, no. 1647).

188 cf. Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope. One Hundred Years of Global Inter-*

derstand another tradition for its own sake and in its own terms... Inescapably, this means putting an end to deliberate misrepresentation and distortion of the position of one's dialogue partner."<sup>189</sup> Such a dialogue depends also on each side's readiness to steer clear of the odious tendency "to compare the ideals of one's own with the achievements of another"<sup>190</sup> religion.

In accordance with this new approach, the *World Council of Churches* published *Guidelines* in 1977,<sup>191</sup> which advocated an end to confrontation and its replacement with dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation. It is stressed that such dialogue cannot take place in a spirit of triumphalism and condescension,<sup>192</sup> or in an aggressive Christian militancy.<sup>193</sup> The document has called upon Christians not to limit God to the dimensions of our human understanding,<sup>194</sup> but to endeavour to speak the truth in the spirit of love,<sup>195</sup> to be guided not by prejudice and stereotyping but rather by the self-understanding of each respective religion,<sup>196</sup> not to disfigure<sup>197</sup> other religions but to see dialogue as an appropriate way of fulfilling the commandment "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour."<sup>198</sup> This appeal for Christians to enter into dialogue in a spirit of repentance, humility and integrity<sup>199</sup> in order to make possible a true encounter of people of different relig-

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*faith Dialogue*, London and New York, 1992. The book traces the effect of the first Parliament of Religions on the subsequent movement for understanding among the religions.

189 Oxtoby, *The Meaning of Other Faiths*, p. 82ff.

190 *Ibid.* p. 83.

191 *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979.

192 I:14.

193 II:18.

194 I:15.

195 II:19; cf. Eph. 4:15.

196 III:4.

197 II:17.

198 II:17; cf. Deut. 5:20.

199 II:21.

ions<sup>200</sup> has most certainly constituted a milestone in the history of interfaith relations, even if a major gap is still occasionally apparent between the professed aims and ideals and what happens in reality.<sup>201</sup>

The most outstanding advocates of interfaith dialogue aimed at overcoming the tendency to dogmatic segregation and isolation are currently Hans Küng, John Hick, Leonard Swidler, Paul Knitter, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Raimondo Panikkar and Paul Schwarzenau. A controversial figure in his own church—he was divested of the *missio canonica*—the Catholic theologian Hans Küng has raised the call for interfaith dialogue. We are living in an interdependent world, in which borders drawn on the basis of religion are no longer clear-cut and numerous believers of diverse faiths live in our midst. And “for the first time in the history of the world,” says Küng “we seem to be witnessing the slow awakening of global ecumenical consciousness and the beginning of a serious religious dialogue<sup>202</sup>.... Ecumenism should not be limited to the *community of Christian churches*; it must include the *community of the great religions*,” just as *oikumene* in the original sense of the word means “the whole inhabited world.”<sup>203</sup>

In the closing years of the second millennium Küng has recognized that such interfaith dialogue is now an indispensable aspect of world politics upon which world peace depends: “There will be

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200 II:22.

201 A Church-run publishing house was evidently not in the forefront of this development when, in 1981, it released a highly tendentious publication on the Bahā'ī Faith, denoting it as “a standard guide for a long time to come.” The image presented of the Bahā'ī Faith is greatly distorted (Francesco Ficicchia, *Der Bahā'ismus. Weltreligion der Zukunft? Geschichte, Lehre und Organization in kritischer Anfrage*, Stuttgart, 1981). A rebuttal has been published: Udo Schaefer/Nicola Towfigh/ Ulrich Gollmer, *Desinformation als Methode. Die Bahā'ismus-Monographie des F. Ficicchia*, Hildesheim: Olms-Verlag, 1995 (English edition in preparation).

202 *Christianity and the World Religions*, p. XIV.

203 *Ibid.*

no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions.”<sup>204</sup> This appeal, Küng affirms, is not demanding the impossible of the religions and various churches; he merely asks that they live up to their own programs and basic intentions, that they direct their appeals for peace not only toward the outside, but also “that they do deeds of reconciliation and begin to remove the conflicts of which they themselves are the cause and for whose explosiveness they are partly to blame.”<sup>205</sup> By this he means their claims to finality and exclusivity.

Not content with appeals alone, Küng has modified and reviewed his own dogmatic positions and approached his encounters with other faiths with an astonishing openness. In 1982 he held a series of lectures in co-operation with other religious studies specialists on Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity as part of the general studies course at the University of Tübingen. These lectures were later (1984) published as *Christianity and the World Religions*.<sup>206</sup> The conclusions he has reached are astounding. He acknowledges Muhammad as a prophet of God and the Qur’ān as the Word of God.<sup>207</sup> He has established the common features of Islam and Christianity, without ignoring the points at which they diverge. He concludes that: “I can as a Christian be convinced that if I have chosen this Jesus as the Christ for my life and death, then along with him I have chosen his follower Muhammad, insofar as he appeals to one and the same God and to Jesus.”<sup>208</sup> Küng was also the initiator of the congress organized in February 1989 by the Goethe Institute in Paris *No World Peace Without Religious Peace* at which scholars of the world’s major religions discussed

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204 *Ibid.* p. 443.

205 *Ibid.* p. 442.

206 Subtitle: *Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism*.

207 *Ibid.* pp. 24ff., 31.

208 *Ibid.* p. 129.



the contributions made by the religions towards the promotion of human rights and world peace.<sup>209</sup>

A further contribution made by Küng to interfaith dialogue has been his book on the search for a global ethic.<sup>210</sup> In this work, Küng acknowledges that the *one* world in which we live only has a chance of survival if it succeeds in developing global ethical standards: “This *one* world needs one basic ethic.”<sup>211</sup> He demonstrates convincingly that religion alone is capable of guaranteeing the basic pre-requisite of such an ethic—its unconditional nature—and demands that “some binding norms, values, ideals and goals”<sup>212</sup> be derived from the ethical principles of the world religions, the common ethic, which “unites all the great religions.”<sup>213</sup>

It was also Küng who, on behalf of the preparation council, drafted the “Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions” on the principles of a global ethic. This was passed and promulgated in Chicago on 4 September 1993.<sup>214</sup> The Declaration, signed by outstanding representatives of the participating religions such as the Dalai Lama, the Cardinal of Chicago, the representative of the World Council of Churches, a president of the World Lutheran League, the general secretary of the *World Conference of Religions for Peace* (WCRP), the spiritual leader of the Sikhs, the Patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism, an important rabbi, a leading Muslim feminist and a representative of the *Bahā’ī International Community*, as well as an overwhelming majority of the delegates from all religions, is a remarkable document of interfaith co-

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209 *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14.2.1989.

210 Originally published in German as *Projekt Weltethos*, München 1990. English edition: *Global Responsibility. In Search of a New World Ethic*, London 1991.

211 *Global Responsibility*, p. XVI.

212 *op. cit.*, p. XVI.

213 *op. cit.*, p. 55.

214 Küng reports about the origins, the difficulties and the complicated process of this undertaking, in: H. Küng/Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions*, London 1993.

operation. In order to overcome the crisis of orientation evident throughout much of the world, a minimum ethics—“a minimum of common values, criteria and basic attitudes”<sup>215</sup>—was formulated out of the moral and spiritual resources of all the religions as a solution to the basic ethical problems of the world:

We confirm that there is already a consensus among the religions which can be the basis for a global ethic—a minimal fundamental consensus concerning binding values, irrevocable standards, and fundamental moral attitudes ... We affirm that there is an irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations and religions. There already exist ancient guidelines for human behaviour which are found in the teachings of the religions of the world and which are the conditions for a sustainable world order.<sup>216</sup>

The formulation incorporates the Golden Rule which can be demonstrated in all the great traditions, and the four ancient directives which also can be found in all the great religions: Do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, do not commit fornication.<sup>217</sup> The Declaration also includes the statement: “We affirm that a common set of values is found in the teachings of the religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic.”<sup>218</sup> In his speech to the Parliament, Küng declared that: “The force of religious convictions must be applied to overcome the global problems of humankind. But this can happen only if the religions stop wearing one another down in disputes, fomenting conflicts and preaching fanaticism, and reflect

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215 Küng, *A Global Ethic*, p. 73.

216 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, quoted from H. Küng/H.-J. Kuschel, *A Global Ethic*, pp. 18, 14.

217 cf. Part II,4 and Part III,5 of the *Declaration*.

218 Küng/Kuschel, *A Global Ethic*, p. 16.

on what is common to them. If they do that, the power of religions would benefit all humankind.”<sup>219</sup>

The fact that the representatives of the world religions gathered together at the same time in one place, stood side by side with equal rights and communicated with respect for one another, without “any claim to superiority on the part of one religion over another—at least for the time of the parliament”<sup>220</sup>—is a sign of hope in a world where religious fanaticism still incites and legitimates violence and bloody conflicts in many countries.

## IX. The Role of Comparative Religious Studies

With the exception of Radhakrishnan and Toynbee, all the opinions discussed so far have been those of theologians. These theologians were or are exponents of their churches; they are rooted in Christian teachings and—at least for the most part—regard the other religions through Christian eyes, with Christian assumptions, with Christian pre-judgement. Someone who is committed to a particular truth generally has difficulty in appreciating and understanding other religious phenomena or in even accepting that behind them, too, there is truth.

It might be supposed that academics involved in comparative religious studies, a discipline committed to the upholding of scientific principles, should be able to reach correct, objective conclusions more easily than those participating in theological research into other religions, whose work—originally seen as ancillary to Christian theology—is still frequently of a nature reminiscent of an apologia or missionary tract. The undogmatic study of religions

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219 Kuschel, “Parliament of the World’s Religions 1893–1993,” in: Küng/Kuschel, *A Global Ethic*, p. 102.

220 Kuschel, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

without reference to Christianity's claim to exclusivity dates from the eighteenth century. Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher, both theologians, encouraged such research, in particular the publication, translation and philological interpretation of the Holy Writings of the major world religions. Of course, the question of truth is irrelevant to this branch of study. In a scientific approach the question of the objective foundations of religion—i. e., the questions of God and revelation—must be left out of consideration, as must also the doctrinal and ethical content of each respective religion. The central concepts of metaphysics such as “God, freedom and immortality”<sup>221</sup> are, as Kant has demonstrated, beyond our rational understanding or empirical experience. Religious studies are descriptive, narrative, comparative; its individual disciplines are religious history, religious phenomenology, religious psychology and religious sociology.

Research in the field of religious studies has made available translations of the scriptures of religions, biographies of the founders of religions, histories of their development and expansion, and descriptions of their religious phenomena. The hard work of many generations of scholars has left us with an immense body of material. One result, at least, has been achieved: religions that in the past were condemned without anything being known about them are now known. Their history, writings, laws, customs and forms of worship are all known today. This is a first step in responding to the urgent need for enlightenment. It has already had the effect of proving that the most derogatory and condemnatory verdicts are unfounded. Tolerance has undoubtedly grown. It is only a small minority of researchers, however, who have begun to approach genuine understanding.

It must be realized that many scholars in the field of religious studies were in the past and still now also are Christian theologi-

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221 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Introduction III, 7.

ans. Only a few have been prepared to lay aside their traditional denominational blinkers and to take seriously the religious phenomena they have observed. Even such scholars as the Swede Tor Andrae, who was genuinely concerned about taking an understanding attitude and tried in his biography of Muḥammad<sup>222</sup> to do justice to the prophet and to defend him from the worst accusations, was hardly able, in his capacity as a Lutheran Bishop, to do other than portray Muḥammad as a fallible human being and measure him against his own image of Christ. Not surprisingly, the comparison worked out to the disadvantage of Muḥammad.

A scholar in this field who is not committed to a particular denomination does not need to take into account his church's official standpoint. Yet it would not be true to say that he is therefore able to approach his subject free of *a priori* judgements and values. Academic studies which are truly objective and value-free are possible, at best, in the natural sciences; and even there, the absence of presumptions can only be guaranteed to a limited extent, since even these sciences cannot be conducted without certain fundamental axioms. The disciplines associated with cultural studies cannot be pursued without reference to values, and any type of evaluation depends upon some yardstick, some kind of assumption. Historical research, for example, uses historical facts in order to understand events. The historian's understanding or interpretation is, however, dependent on his basic beliefs and convictions. This is why, for instance, there are so many different answers to the question of the causes of World War I, despite extensive knowledge of the facts; and this is why the evaluations of the prophet Muḥammad by such historians as Jacob Burckhardt and Arnold Toynbee are so widely divergent.

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222 *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, translated from the German by Theophil Menzel, London 1936.

In the study of religions the evaluation of the phenomena observed is even more dependent on the researcher's premises and subjective views than is the case in history. Those researchers who seem not to be bound to the concept of revelation as defined in Christian dogma and who appear to approach other religions open-mindedly do, nonetheless, harbour their own dogmatic assumptions, such as their conviction that there is no such thing as revelation. The messages of the religions are not the Word of God but merely the work of man.

In an earlier publication<sup>223</sup> I discussed this problem at some length in connection with research in the field of Islamic studies, where the difficulties are particularly evident. It might therefore be worth quoting a significant passage from that work:

Different results are only to be expected if Islam is portrayed by a committed Christian, by a hard-boiled atheist or by a Muslim. The researcher's attitude to his subject—i. e., that divine revelation after Christ is impossible, that there is no such thing as divine revelation, or that the Arab prophet revealed the Word of God—is bound to be reflected in the way it is portrayed. For it is of crucial significance whether a religion is portrayed from within or without. An individual who is not content with a mere description of religious phenomena and their interpretation according to subjective criteria which are presumed to be absolute standards, should direct his attention to the interpretation of a religion by those who believe in it.<sup>224</sup>

I find my views confirmed by Willard G. Oxtoby, a Canadian scholar in the field of religious studies. Having studied this phe-

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223 *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, p. 138ff.

224 *Ibid.* p. 139.

nomenon of dogmatic pre-assumptions, he has come up with the following rule of thumb: “You get out what you put in.”<sup>225</sup>

A further example showing how religious pre-assumptions affect the researcher’s evaluation of his results is in the Protestant scholar Gustav Mensching’s standard work *Soziologie der Religion*.<sup>226</sup> In the section concerning the legal structures of religions, and in particular of the Church, he concludes that the Spirit (*pneuma*) and the law are basically incompatible as their relationship is one of reverse reciprocity. He argues that the vitality of the Spirit is characterized by an absence or a minimum of legal organization. He regards the existence of such a legal organization as a criterion by which the decline in the vitality of the original Spirit can be measured. The history of the Church does, indeed, offer ample material which might support such a view. Mensching comes to an *a priori* conclusion, however, when he makes the following generalization: “Where the spirit unites and guides people there is no need for organization, but when the vitality of the spirit declines a uniting and guiding organizational form becomes necessary.”<sup>227</sup>

This, then, is also his verdict concerning the Bahā’ī community—which is structured and governed according to a rule of law—and its administrative order.<sup>228</sup> This verdict, which I dealt with at length in my doctoral thesis,<sup>229</sup> clearly emanates from a

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225 Quoted in Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, p. 29. Küng quotes from Oxtoby’s *The Meaning of Other Faiths* (Philadelphia, 1983), no page number cited.

226 Bonn <sup>1</sup>1947, <sup>2</sup>1968. French edition: *Sociologie Religieuse. Le rôle de la religion dans les relations communautaires des humains*, Paris 1951.

227 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

228 Indeed, the Bahā’ī community and its order are subjected to harsh criticism by the late leader of a Protestant Research Centre (Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, Stuttgart), Kurt Hutten, in his work *Seher, Grübler, Enthusiasten*, Stuttgart 1982, as well as in the publication referred to in footnote 201 published by the same centre.

229 *Die Grundlagen der Verwaltungsordnung der Baha’i*, p. 40ff.

Protestant, spiritualist and charismatic concept of religion, a position radically upheld by the professor of canon law, Rudolf Sohm,<sup>230</sup> and shared by the Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner<sup>231</sup>: religious truth cannot possibly take on a legal structure without sacrificing its very essence, since “the spirit bloweth where it willeth.”<sup>232</sup> However, this view is a Protestant prejudice that does not do justice to other religions in which the legal structure has been established by the Founder of the religion, as is the case in the Bahā’ī Faith. Once again we are confronted with a prejudicial verdict passed by an academic authority, which on closer examination proves to be unscientific and dogmatic.<sup>233</sup>

In fact, the prejudice of agnosticism is not an advantage; it is frequently even more of a disadvantage than denominational prejudice. Non-religious researchers subsume the result they have obtained from historical and phenomenological research under the religious concepts acquired from Christianity and Judaism, and thus obstruct their own way to a proper understanding of the religion under study. Very often they lack sympathy, sensitivity and understanding for the fundamental religious element which lies in the sphere of the numinous or irrational and which does not reveal

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230 Referring to Matt. 18:20 (“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them”) and John 3:8 (“The wind blows where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goes: So is everyone that is born in the spirit”), Sohm strongly condemned the fact that in the course of its history the Church assumed a structure based on law. According to him, this was the “Church’s Fall.” The order destined for the Church was, as Sohm asserted, that of a “pneumatic anarchy.” His thesis is based upon his conviction that spirit and law are incompatible opposites (*Kirchenrecht*, vol. 1, p. 1, 20ff., 700).

231 *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, London: Lutherworth Press 1952, Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1953.

232 cf. John 3:8

233 For more details on this subject I refer to my elucidations in U. Schaefer/N. Towfigh/U. Gollmer, *Desinformation als Methode. Die Bahā’ismus-Monographie des F. Ficicchia*, chapter 3, I.



itself to purely intellectual research.<sup>234</sup> Basically one can say that the judgements of a non-religious person, or of an atheist who sees in religion nothing more than a human striving for truth, or a longing for a father-figure (as in the Our Father of the Lord's Prayer)<sup>235</sup> or a search for comfort and security, are about as relevant to the field of religious studies as that of a deaf person about a symphony.

As already noted, Western research on the subject of Islam demonstrates the influence of the researcher's prior assumptions on his conclusions. A person who believes the Qur'ān to be the Word of God will find his view confirmed when he reads it. The situation is completely different if one is of the opinion that the Qur'ān is not the Word of God. A reader who sees in it only the words of Muḥammad<sup>236</sup> will regard it as a hodge-podge of theological bits and pieces, gathered by Muḥammad from a variety of different sources and randomly thrown together. Thus it can be mistakenly concluded that Muḥammad usurped the station of Prophet, and that therefore he was a false prophet. Alternatively, it has been asserted that he was an epileptic,<sup>237</sup> a politician whose success rested on a pious fraud, or at best a victim of self-delusion. If the Qur'ān is not the result of divine revelation, then it can only be of human origin, i. e., it must be eclectic or syncretistic in na-

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234 *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, p. 138ff.

235 For Sigmund Freud "a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father"; the belief in God: a "father complex" (Sigmund Freud, "Leonardo da Vinci," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XI [1910], p. 123; religion: "a hallucinatory delusion" (*ibid.*, "The Future of an Illusion," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI), a "universal obsessional neurosis" ("Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices," p. 34).

236 William Muir quotes (unfortunately without giving the source) the German orientalist von Hammer (presumably von Hammer-Purgstall) as stating "that we hold the Coran to be as surely Mahomet's word, as the Mahometans hold it to be the word of God" (*The Life of Mahomet*, p. XXVII).

237 For instance Frants Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammeds*, p. 139.

ture. Hence, nearly without exception, Western researchers portray Islam as an amalgam of pagan, Jewish and Christian concepts and teachings. Entire generations of researchers<sup>238</sup> have made it their life's work to trace the supposed origins of the elements of Islamic teaching and to prove the syncretistic nature of Islam.<sup>239</sup> Goldziher calls Islam an "eclectic component of religious ideas" and asserts that its "receptive character... was moulded at its birth and inherent in its regulations... Its founder, Muḥammad, did not proclaim new ideas. He did not enrich earlier conceptions of man's relation to the transcendental and infinite."<sup>240</sup> In an earlier publication<sup>241</sup> I discussed at length this image of Islam among scholars in the field of religious studies, and more detailed information may be obtained there. The remarks to be found in the relevant literature are typified by the following statement from the renowned orientalist Francesco Gabrieli concerning the prophet Muḥammad: "That he was no great thinker is evidenced by his obscure and chaotic holy book, in which are dutifully gathered the revelations he believed himself to have received over a period of two decades from his God and Lord."<sup>242</sup> Similar verdicts were passed by the theologian Gerhard Rosenkranz on Bahā'u'llāh's *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, which he describes as a "hodge-podge of instructions,"<sup>243</sup> and by the orientalist Christian Cannuyer who calls this

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238 Noteworthy among these are, in particular, Tor Andrae, Karl Vollers, Richard Hartmann, Hubert Grimme, Ignaz Goldziher, C. H. Becker, H. v. Glasenapp.

239 "The eclecticism that marked the infancy of Islam only now reached its full fertility. It is among the most fascinating problems of research for those who devote their attention to this province of religious literature to track down the widely different sources from which this motley material springs, and to understand the trends and aspirations that it documents" (Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 40/41).

240 *Ibid.* p. 5.

241 *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, p. 144ff.

242 "Muḥammad und der Islam als weltgeschichtliche Erscheinungen," in *Historia Mundi. Handbuch der Weltgeschichte*, vol. 5, p. 347.

243 *Die Bahā'ī*, p. 32.

work “*assez désordonné. Il présente un caractère assez décousu, fait un peu de bric et de broc.*”<sup>244</sup>

The question whether any holy Scripture is the Word of God or at least contains the Word of God, or, is merely the word of man is not something which can be answered scientifically: It is a question of faith. It should, however, be expected of a scholar investigating a religion that he conduct his research under the hypothesis that the Book which has been holy to many generations and is still holy to millions of people at least might be the Word of God. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, professor of Comparative History of Religions at Harvard University, has succinctly analyzed this question of the researcher’s pre-assumptions in examining the Qur’ān. He writes:

If an outsider picks up the book and goes through it even asking himself, ‘What is there here that has led Muslims to suppose this from God?’ he will miss the reverberating impact. If, on the other hand, he picks up the book and asks himself, What would these sentences convey to me if I believed them to be God’s word? then he can much more effectively understand what has been happening these many centuries in the Muslim world.<sup>245</sup>

Smith has established the principle that no statement about religion—presumably meaning ‘about the self-image of a religion’—is valid until it is recognized by the adherents of this religion itself.<sup>246</sup> Similarly, the theologian Karl Ernst Nipkow refers to the “well-known hermeneutical rule that a foreign tradition should be presented in such a wise that its representatives

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244 *Les Bahā’īs*, p. 70. For more details on this subject I refer to my remarks in U. Schaefer/N. Towfigh/U. Gollmer, *Desinformation als Methode*, ch. 5, III, 4.

245 *On Understanding Islam*, p. 291.

246 Quoted in Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, p. 97.

can accept it as their own interpretation.”<sup>247</sup> Leonard Swidler, in referring to Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Raimondo Panikkar states that “the side interpreted must be able to recognize itself in the interpretation.”<sup>248</sup> If such standards were taken seriously, the reproaches of unbelief and of superstition would no longer hinder interfaith dialogue: Unbelief is the verdict of believers on the hypotheses of enlightened scholars of religious studies; and superstition is the verdict of the latter on religion. After all, religion is their subject and something that they claim to know better than the believers themselves. Bahā’īs know what this means. In many portrayals of their faith made by scholars of religious studies they can hardly recognize themselves. Often what they see is a completely distorted image.

It is undeniable that a more understanding attitude is gradually emerging in this field of study. And it is already evident that it is the religiously committed researchers, rather than those who are indifferent towards religion, who are in the forefront of this development. That Wilfred Cantwell Smith has devoted a whole chapter to the question “Is the Qur’ān the Word of God?”<sup>249</sup> would have been unthinkable in the past. Some Christian theologians, too, have asked this question and have finally answered in the affirmative: for instance, Paul Schwarzenau sees Muḥammad as a prophet and the Qur’ān as a post-biblical divine revelation;<sup>250</sup> likewise Hans Küng.<sup>251</sup> When Smith writes about the transformation that is taking place, namely: “I am deeply persuaded that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the religious history of humankind will

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247 “Oikumene,” in: Johannes Lähnemann (ed.), *Die Wiederkehr der Religionen*, p. 180.

248 “Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue,” p. 44.

249 *On Understanding Islam*, p. 282ff.

250 *Korankunde für Christen. Ein Zugang zum heiligen Buch der Moslems*, Stuttgart 1982.

251 *Christianity and World Religions*, p. 28ff.

be taking a major new turn,<sup>252</sup> the Bahā'īs can agree with him in a much more profound sense than Smith might surmise.

What the academic branch of religious studies can do is to make an important contribution to the awakening of an attitude of mutual respect and understanding among religions and to the promotion of readiness to enter into dialogue. A prerequisite for such rapprochement is the acknowledgement in Kūng's words that

Truth cannot be different in the different religions, but only one: through all the contradictions, we have to seek what is complementary; through all the exclusions, that which is inclusive.<sup>253</sup>

What should not be expected of this branch of study, and something which would be of service to no-one, is the creation by means of eclecticism of a uniform world religion as a sort of substrate of all the various religions.<sup>254</sup> Such a syncretistic religion (which the Bahā'ī Faith is frequently purported to be<sup>255</sup>)

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252 *On Understanding Islam*, p. 299.

253 *Christianity and the World Religions*, pp. XVIII-XVIX.

254 An historical attempt to produce such an eclectic mixture in the form of a religion of unity took place in Northern India in the seventeenth century. The Great Moghul Akbar, himself a Muslim, who ruled over a disunited population (Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Hindus, and Parsees) summoned representatives of each of the religions to his court and, in order to bring about harmony in his kingdom, created from elements of all the religious traditions a new "divine faith" (*Dīn-i-ilāhī*) which he promulgated in 1682. Despite his good intentions, this syncretism was not well received and his religion did not survive his death (cf. Oxtoby, *The Meaning of Other Faiths*, p. 74ff.).

255 cf., for instance, Rosenkranz, *Die Bahā'ī*, p. 50ff.; Rosenkranz, *Der christliche Glaube*, p. 45; W. K. Visser't Hooft, *No Other Name*, p. 43ff.; Oxtoby, *The Meaning of Other Faiths*, p. 75. Historical facts show this reproach to be unfounded; something created synthetically by means of eclecticism, as the above example shows, does not have the inherent power which has made of the Bahā'ī Faith 150 years after its birth a dynamic, rapidly expanding religion which, in geographical terms, is now the second most widespread religion after Christianity (cf. *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Book of the Year 1988*, p. 3).

with its random pluralism resulting from absolute indifference, is not at all desirable. As Rosenkranz rightly points out, the best that might be expected from such a religion would be, “an anything-goes religion with pale, bloodless phrases and aesthetically touching, romantic and fanciful rituals.”<sup>256</sup>

Another thing scholars of religious studies cannot do is to deliver incontrovertible proof of the unity of the religions. At best, they can provide evidence that such unity is plausible, that one can see it if one so chooses. It is like a glass of water which, depending on the observer’s point of view, is either half full or half empty: both views are correct. Similarly, one can regard the differences and contradictions among religions as the most important aspect; or, if one chooses, one can recognize that beyond the diversity there is an essence which is the same in all.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith is one of those scholars who have posited a unity among the world religions, “a unity of mankind’s religious history.”<sup>257</sup> N. Ross Reat and Edmund Perry view the five world religions they examine (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam) as “different expressions of the same valid ultimate reality”<sup>258</sup>—as “divergent symbolic expressions of this central reality,” which is universally valid.<sup>259</sup> Recognizing that the days are passed when religious thought could adequately serve humanity by championing the religion of a single civilization,<sup>260</sup> they have attempted to find the common denominator of these religions and to construct a “world theology,” reconceptualizing the ultimate referent of each religion so that its universal validity is no

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256 *Der christliche Glaube angesichts der Weltreligionen*, p. 104.

257 “Those who believe in the unity of humankind, and those who believe in the unity of God, should be prepared therefore to discover a unity of humankind’s religious history” (*Towards a World Theology*, p. 4).

258 *Towards a World Theology*, p. 1

259 *op. cit.*, p. 7.

260 *op. cit.*, p. 1.

longer obscured.<sup>261</sup> The theologian and religious philosopher John Hick, who persuasively argues for a philosophy of religious pluralism<sup>262</sup> calls for a “Copernican revolution in our Christian attitude to other religions.”<sup>263</sup> Just as the Copernican revolution in astronomy “consisted in a transformation of the way in which men understood the universe and their own location within it,” the Copernican revolution in theology “must involve an equally radical transformation of our conception of the universe of faiths and the place of our own religion within it. It must involve a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the sort that it is *God* who is at the centre and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.”<sup>264</sup>

What is beyond the scope of scientific research is to depict a history of the salvation of mankind running as a *Leitmotiv* through all the world’s religions in accordance with a divine Plan, as it is described in the Writings of the Bāb and of Bahā’u’llāh. Academics are not in a position to fathom the plans and intentions of God. They can, however, analyze the structures and characteristics that religions have in common, aspects which many thinkers have acknowledged and interpreted as the “unity of religions.” Let us now go on to examine what these common features are.

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261 *op. cit.*, p. 6. See also John B. Cobb, Jr., “Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World,” in: John Hick/Hasan Askari (eds.), *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, Aldershot 1985. It is noteworthy that there are similar attempts in the field of philosophy. David A. Dilworth tries to put Eastern and Western philosophies and religions into a common theoretical framework “that repossesses our pre-modern and modern, Eastern and Western philosophical heritages”: “We need a new and essentially comparative hermeneutical expertise to be able to understand and appreciate the major texts of world philosophy, and to co-ordinate their lessons into a single intertextual picture” (*Philosophy in World Perspective*, p. 6).

262 *God Has Many Names*, p. 88ff.

263 *God Has Many Names*, p. 36; *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 120ff.

264 *Ibid.*

## X.

### *Una Religio in Rituum Varietate*<sup>265</sup>

Most of the arguments used in Christian apologetics in reference to the erroneousness and inferiority of non-Christian religions have been rendered untenable by scientific inquiry into the direct sources of these religions.<sup>266</sup> Research in the sphere of religious studies has revealed more and more clearly how closely related and how similar the phenomena of the various religions are, despite all the differences in forms, rituals and laws. According to the Harvard orientalist, Annemarie Schimmel, such differences belong to the outer sphere of religion, the husk which separates one religion from the other.<sup>267</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher warned students of religion:

If you want to compare religion with religion as the eternal progressing work of the world spirit, you must give up the vain and futile wish that there ought to be only one; your antipathy against the variety of religions must be let aside, and with as much impartiality as possible you must join all those which have developed from the eternally abandoned bosom of the Universe through the changing forms and progressive traditions of man.<sup>268</sup>

However confusingly different they may be, the religions are messages of salvation, providing answers to the eternal fundamental questions of human existence: Where do I come from, and where am I going? What is the purpose of my life? Why must I suffer? How should I live, what is right and wrong?

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265 This phrase originates from Nicolaus Cusanus; cf. pp. 84 and 159

266 Heiler, "The History of Religions as a Preparation," p. 139.

267 *Der Beitrag der islamischen Mystik zur Einheit der Religionen*, p. 47.

268 *On Religion*, Speech 5 (241).



What is the source of man's moral consciousness and moral responsibility? Each religion sees itself as a path to a meaningful life; to well-being; and to the salvation of both the individual and mankind as a whole. The following constitutes a summary of only the essential similarities.

1. The first fundamental point that all religions have in common is the conviction that religious phenomena are based on the reality of the Transcendental, the Holy, the Divine, the Eternal One,<sup>269</sup> the Great Being,<sup>270</sup> and that beyond all the fluctuations there exists eternal reason, an eternal order, a non-material Ultimate Reality, the Reality of Realities,<sup>271</sup> the Eternal Truth<sup>272</sup> which is neither empirically verifiable nor logically demonstrable.<sup>273</sup> Whereas in the religions of the East the Real, the Ultimate is conceived as non-personal, it has been given personal characteristics in the Near-Eastern prophetic religions, expressed in human images, such as the image of the Ruler, the Lord, the Father, the Friend, the Beloved, and in names such as Jahwe, Allah, and Ahura Mazda. However, these images and names are merely inadequate descriptions of that Ultimate Reality. They are like the foothills of a mountain that always remain shrouded in darkness, a "Cape of Good Hope."<sup>274</sup> They are symbolic expressions which present this Ultimate Reality to human apprehension.

As to the question why the Ultimate or Real should be thought and experienced by human beings in a range of different ways rather than in only one way, John Hick elucidated:

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269 John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 22.

270 Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 11:3; 11:6; 11:8; 11:12 etc.; see also Hans Küng, in: Küng/Kuschel, *A Global Ethic*, p. 65.

271 *satyasya satyam* in the *Upanishads*.

272 *al-haqq* in Sufism.

273 Reat/Perry, *A World Theology*, p. 2.

274 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 208.

We ‘see through a glass, darkly,’ and the glass is constituted by the set of human concepts operating within our cultures. The result is the range of ways of conceiving and experiencing the divine that is to be found in history<sup>275</sup> ... We can I think only fall back upon the fact that human existence has developed in partially different ways within different streams of history, so that the great cultures of the earth have come to constitute different ways of being human. As such they involve different ways of being religious. Different human mentalities—the Indian, the Chinese, the Graeco-Semitic, the African, etc.—have experienced the Ultimate in partially different perspectives.<sup>276</sup> However, perspectives may well be complementary, enlarging and correcting rather than contradicting one another. And it may well be that in the future, with the emergence of a global human consciousness, the religious traditions will become able fully to accept one another as permissible variations, mutually contributory to a greater understanding of the Ultimate.<sup>277</sup>

2. Another feature common to all religions is the belief that this transcendental reality reveals itself to mankind in the form of great, holy figures, who speak to man and show him the path to the sanctification of his life; the path to salvation; and that this transcendental reality is immanent in the human heart. St. Paul describes man as “the temple of God.”<sup>278</sup> St. Augustine states

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275 *God Has Many Names*, p. 67.

276 This is quite in accordance with ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s statement: “The differences among the religions of the world are due to the varying types of minds” (*Selections* 31:5).

277 “Religious Diversity as Challenge and Promise,” p. 20. On this subject see also M. Momen’s noteworthy contribution “Relativism: A Basis for Bahā’ī-Metaphysics,” in: M. Momen (ed.), *Studies in the Bābī and Bahā’ī Religions*, vol. 5, pp. 185-217.

278 I Cor. 3:16; II Cor. 6:16.

that God is “*interior intimo meo.*”<sup>279</sup> According to the Qur’ān, God is closer to man than his neck-vein,<sup>280</sup> and according to Bahā’u’llāh “closer than his own self.”<sup>281</sup> In his Scripture also, man is described as a temple of the Divine; a robe, a garment, a stronghold,<sup>282</sup> as a throne of the revelation of God,<sup>283</sup> and as a lamp filled with divine light.<sup>284</sup>

3. Furthermore, all religions share the conviction that this ultimate reality which we call God—and which in Buddhism, where the concept of God is absent<sup>285</sup> but is brought to bear in the terms *Nirvana*, *Shunyata* and *Dharmakaya*—is man’s ultimate and highest goal. It is the embodiment of absolute perfection, truth, and justice and of all that is good and beautiful. It is the *summum bonum*, the highest good. In all religions it is therefore the goal that is striven for: “‘What is not the eternal,’ said Gotama Buddha, ‘is not worthy of man’s rejoicing, not worthy that man should welcome it nor turn to it’.”<sup>286</sup>

4. Religions all share the teaching that that which we call God is justice, love, compassion and mercy, which are generously poured out over mankind. God is love according to John,<sup>287</sup> and in Buddhism the innermost essence of the Divine is “the great heart of compassion” (*mahā-karuṇā-citta*).<sup>288</sup>

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279 *Confessions*, III, VI: “more inward than my most inward part.”

280 50:15.

281 *Gleanings* 93:6.

282 *The Hidden Words*, Arabic 58, 64, 14, 9, 10.

283 *Gleanings* 93:5.

284 *The Hidden Words*, Arabic 11, 12.

285 On this subject see Raimondo Panikkar, *The Silence of God. The Answer of the Buddha*. Transl. from Italian, New York 1989. I refer also to Jack McLean’s “Prolegomena to a Bahā’ī Theology,” p. 31, footnote 16.

286 *Majjhima-Nikaya* II, 263.

287 I John 4:16.

288 *Nehan-gyo (Nirvana-sutra)*, quoted from B. Lane-Suzuki, *Mahayana Buddhism*, p. 117.

5. A further feature common to all religions is the idea that man's path to God is one of sacrifice, renunciation, resignation, moral discipline, the *via purgativa*, prayer and meditation. In prayer, Friedrich Heiler points out, "all high religions agree, that their saints and devotees together form one great invisible chorus of prayer."<sup>289</sup>

6. Furthermore, all religions teach that the path to God is also the path to one's neighbour, service to others, the *via activa*. All religions demand boundless love for one's neighbour, a love from which no-one is excluded. Buddha commanded his disciples: "Fare ye forth, brethren, on the mission that is for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, to take compassion on the world, to work profit and good and happiness to gods and men."<sup>290</sup> His words are reminiscent of those of Christ when he said: "I have compassion on the multitude,<sup>291</sup> because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd."<sup>292</sup>

7. In all religions this love also includes love for one's enemies. The opinion that the command to love one's enemy is unique to Christianity is a prejudice traceable to Tertullian.<sup>293</sup> This command is to be found in Judaism,<sup>294</sup> Buddhism, Taoism and Brahmanism, as well as in Şufism. Lao Tse demands of his followers that they recompense injury with kindness.<sup>295</sup> In the *Mahābhārata* we read that it is one's duty to help "even an enemy, when he sought one's hospitality. The tree continued to give its protecting

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289 "The History of Religions as a Preparation," p. 145.

290 *Digha Nikaya* XIV, 22 [45] (*Mahapadana-Suttanta*).

291 Matt. 15:32.

292 Matt. 9:36.

293 *Ad Scapulam* I.

294 cf. Ex. 23:4-5; Lev. 19:17. On this subject see Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, ch. XXII.

295 *Tao Tê King* LXIII.

shadow to the man who was cutting it down.”<sup>296</sup> Love for one’s neighbour and one’s enemy is a constantly recurring theme in the Buddhist scriptures.<sup>297</sup>

8. It is the essential message of all religions that man’s life has significance, beyond biological survival and the pursuit of pleasure.<sup>298</sup> Religions all share the belief that man’s life is not confined to this earthly existence, that he possesses an immortal soul, that the hour of his death is the hour of truth in which he is called to account for his life on earth and that he will be rewarded for the good and punished for the bad.

According to the sayings of Buddha two things dog man’s “steps like shadow in pursuit” when death catches up with him: “man’s merits and the sins he here hath wrought<sup>299</sup>... Not in the sky, not in the midst of the sea, not if we enter into the clefts of the mountains, is there known a spot in the whole world where a man might be freed from an evil deed<sup>300</sup>... [Hence] let him make good store for the life elsewhere. Sure platform in some other future world, rewards for the virtue on good beings wait.”<sup>301</sup> According to the Gospel all who “do iniquity will be gathered [and] cast into the furnace of the fire<sup>302</sup> [whereas for them who keep the commandments the] reward is great in heaven.”<sup>303</sup> In the Qur’ān it is revealed: “Shall he then who is a believer be as he who sinneth grossly? They shall not be held alike. As to those who believe and do that which is right, they shall have gardens of eternal abode as

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296 Quoted from J. M. Macfie, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 162 (XII. The Book of Consolation).

297 More on this subject see Friedrich Heiler, “The History of Religions as a Preparation,” p. 148ff.

298 Reat/Perry, *A World Theology*, p. 1.

299 *Sanyutta Nikaya*, Part I, Kosala Sutta 71 (p. 98).

300 *Dhammapada* 127.

301 *Sanyutta Nikaya*, *ibid.*

302 Matt. 13:41-43.

303 Luke 6:13.

the meed of their works: But as for those who grossly sin, their abode shall be the fire.”<sup>304</sup> According to Bahā’u’llāh “the canopy of World Order is upraised upon the two pillars of reward and punishment.”<sup>305</sup> All good and bad done by man in this earthly life, even the secrets of his heart are known to the divine Judge<sup>306</sup>:

Death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds<sup>307</sup>... [Then] for every act performed shall be a recompense according to the estimate of God.<sup>308</sup>

Annemarie Schimmel has pointed out that the image of a Paradise promising everlasting bliss, joy, peace and eternal life is to be found in nearly all the major religions.<sup>309</sup>

9. The idea is enshrined in all religions that man must live on earth according to certain standards in order to attain salvation both in this life and in the life to come. All religions have established a set of values, a moral code, a yardstick for distinguishing right and wrong; guidelines for human behaviour.<sup>310</sup> Everywhere

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304 32:20-21; 21:57-59.

305 *Tablets* 8:55; 8:61; 3:25; 11:6.

306 *The Hidden Words*, Persian 59, 60; *Gleanings* 70.

307 *The Hidden Words*, Arabic 31.

308 *Tablets* 12:24.

309 “Der Beitrag der islamischen Mystik zur Einheit der Religionen,” p. 47ff.

310 As already mentioned, the *Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions* acknowledged that among the religions there is a universal fundamental consensus concerning binding rules, irrevocable standards, and fundamental attitudes. This acknowledgement is all the more significant since today, under the influence of secular thought, the majority of Catholic moral theologians proclaim the autonomy of morals and hold the opinion that as far as the content is concerned there can be no specific Christian morality (Alfons Auer, *Autonome Moral und christlicher Glaube*, Tübingen <sup>2</sup>1977; Hans Böckle, “Werte und Normbegründung,” in: Böckle, Franz/ Franz-Xaver Kaufmann/Karl Rahner/Bernhard Welte [eds.], *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft*, vol. 12, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1981, pp. 37-89; Herbert Haag, “Vor dem Bösen ratlos,” in: *zur Debatte*. Themen der Katholischen Akademie in Bayern 1979, Issue 2)—a position which has been rejected by Pope

we come across the basic commandments not to kill, to steal, to lie, or to commit adultery. Everywhere we find the demand that man should bear fruit in this life, do good and shun evil.

Common to all religions are the central virtues for which man should strive, virtues such as love, compassion, pity, goodness, justice, righteousness, truthfulness, honesty, uprightness, trustworthiness, chastity, gentleness, humility, patience, selflessness, detachment, and piety. The negative qualities branded as sin are also largely identical: hatred, greed, covetousness, malice, envy, anger, arrogance, haughtiness, pride, idleness, lying, hypocrisy, craftiness, rancour, cruelty and so on.

These virtues and vices appear in the religions in a variety of contexts, expressed in different language and with particular shifts of emphasis. However, the differences among them are of little importance. Some such differences have arisen owing to the over-emphasis or even exaggeration of certain virtues in a particular religion (such as that of chastity in Christianity,<sup>311</sup> or in Islam that of submission to God, which led to the quietism of the *mutawakkilūn*<sup>312</sup>). Other such differences have arisen as a result of the relegation of certain values to the periphery or even to their abandon-

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John Paul II in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, proclaimed on 6 August 1993 (see nos. 13, 15, 84ff., 102ff., 114ff.). For Protestant theology, too, the Christian ethic is not based on revealed norms and values but rather on the life lived in the recognition of the reality of God and in community with him (Rudolf Stählin in the encyclopaedia “*Christliche Religion*” [keyword “Ethos,” p. 81]; Eberhard Jüngel, “Wertlose Wahrheit,” in: Karl Schmidt/E. Jüngel/E. Schelz, *Die Tyrannei der Werte*, pp. 5, 47ff.).

311 For details see U. Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion*, p. 175ff., p. 218.

312 From *tawakkul*: trust in God. Already in an early period Muslim ascetics practised an exaggerated form of trust in God, a quietistic attitude which led to total indifference to one’s personal interests: “Those who professed it abandoned themselves completely to God’s care and to the fate that God had fixed for them. They were in God’s hand as a corpse in the hands of its washer: indifferent and wholly without volition. In this sense they called themselves *mutawakkilūn*, ‘those who trust in God’” (Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 132).

ment, e. g. the cardinal virtue of justice in Protestant theology and ethics.<sup>313</sup>

10. This common ethical basis of all major religions, the common ethic, which “unites all the great religions”<sup>314</sup> and which is mankind’s Great Spiritual Heritage,<sup>315</sup> is demonstrated conclusively in the Golden Rule known to us from the Gospel: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”<sup>316</sup> With this verse Christ declares this universal commandment to be the quintessence of religion. Indeed, it is to be found in all religions.<sup>317</sup>

In response to the question “Is there a value according to which one can act throughout one’s life?” Confucius answered: “The saying about consideration: ‘Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you’.”<sup>318</sup> In the *Mahābhārata*, one of the Hindu holy scriptures, is the statement: “One should not behave towards others in a way which is unpleasant for oneself: that is the

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313 According to the philosopher Gustav Radbruch, Protestant moral teachings tend to dissolve justice in the sea of mercy (“Gerechtigkeit und Gnade,” in: *Rechtsphilosophie*, p. 332): “In these teachings justice has no or only secondary status. The commandment of love applies where inter-human relationships are concerned, the commandment of faith rules the individual’s behaviour towards God, whilst God’s relationship with mankind is determined by the promise of mercy... In this system of Christian virtues there is no place for the first of the worldly virtues, the cardinal virtue Justice” (*op. cit.*, p. 330). The Protestant theologian Emil Brunner comes to the same conclusion: “The connection between justice and love was not made clear by the Reformers (*Justice and the Social Order*, p. 263) ... One of the most disastrous obscurities in the doctrine of the law of nature is that concerning the relationship between justice and love, *ius naturale* and *lex naturae*” (*op. cit.*, p. 266); cf. also U. Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion*, p. 180ff.; *Desinformation als Methode*, ch. 3, I.

314 H. Küng, *A Global Ethic*, p. 73.

315 Suheil Bushrui, *Retrieving Our Spiritual Heritage*, p. 37.

316 Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31.

317 cf. also H. T. D. Rost, *The Golden Rule. A Universal Ethic*, Oxford 1986.

318 *The Analects* 15:23.



essence of morality.”<sup>319</sup> The Buddhist Scripture contains the commandment: “A state which is not pleasant or enjoyable for me will also not be for him; and how can I impose on another a state which is not pleasant or enjoyable for me?”<sup>320</sup> In the oldest Zoroastrian writings, the *Gāthās*, one finds the verse: “That which is good for all and any one, for whomsoever: that is good for me ... What I hold good for self, I should for all.”<sup>321</sup> The Book of Tobias in the Old Testament includes the maxim: “What thou dost not wish for thyself, do not do to others,”<sup>322</sup> and in the Talmud we find rabbi Hillel’s statement: “Do not to others what you would not want them to do you.”<sup>323</sup>

In the Qur’ān we read: “Woe to the stinters who, when they measure against the people, take full measure but, when they measure for them or weigh for them, do skimp.”<sup>324</sup> Islamic interpreters have not restricted the meaning of this verse to trade but have regarded it as a general verdict on those who judge themselves by a different measure than that which they apply to others.<sup>325</sup> The same is stated in the Gospel: “With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.”<sup>326</sup> According to Islamic traditions, man may not expect compassion from God if he has refused it to his neighbour.<sup>327</sup> Al-Bukhārī has recorded a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet said: “None of you has faith unless he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”<sup>328</sup>

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319 XIII, 114, 8.

320 *Sanyutta Nikaya* V, 353.35-342.2.

321 8th *Gāthā*, Yasna 43:1.

322 4:15.

323 *Shabbat* 31a.

324 83:1-3.

325 cf. ‘Alī Abdullah Yusuf, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’ān*, vol. II, p. 1703.

326 Matt. 7:2.

327 The same concept is expressed in the Lord’s Prayer: “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matt. 6:12; cf. also 14-15).

328 Quoted in Maulana Muhammad ‘Alī, *A Manual of Ḥadīth*, ch. II, no. 9.

The Golden Rule is also evident in many places in the revelation of Bahā'u'llāh, as, for instance, in The Hidden Words:

O Son of Spirit! Know thou of a truth: He that biddeth men be just and himself committeth iniquity is not of Me, even though he bear My name<sup>329</sup> ... O Son of Being! Ascribe not to any soul that which thou wouldst not have ascribed to thee.<sup>330</sup>

In the *Kalimāt-i-Firdawsiiyyih* is found the statement:

Choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou choosest for thyself;<sup>331</sup>

and in the *Kitāb-i-Īqān* we read:

He<sup>332</sup> should not wish for others that which he doth not wish for himself, nor promise that which he doth not fulfil.<sup>333</sup>

The *Sūratu'l-Mulūk* contains the verse:

Lay not on any soul a load which ye would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for any one the things ye would not desire for yourselves.<sup>334</sup>

The Book of Laws, *the Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, also includes the admonishment:

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329 Arabic 28.

330 Arabic 29.

331 *Tablets* 6:20.

332 i. e., the believer.

333 215.

334 *Gleanings* 66:8.

Wish not for others what ye wish not for yourselves;<sup>335</sup>

the members of the *House of Justice* are obliged

to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly.<sup>336</sup>

11. The prophetic religions of the Asiatic-Semitic tradition have further common features: belief in only *one* God;<sup>337</sup> the concept of a Covenant between God and man; the dependence of salvation upon belief in the Messenger;<sup>338</sup> daily obligatory prayer in worship of the divine Majesty; the obligation to read daily from the Scripture; fasting; the institution of a shared meal, and a doctrine of grace.

12. The most fundamental feature common to all religions is mysticism, the highest aim of which is the uniting of the soul with the eternal God. Jewish Cabbalism and Chassidism, and Arab-Persian Muslim Şufism bear remarkable similarities to Christian mysticism. This in turn is similar to forms of mysticism in the ma-

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335 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 148.

336 *Ibid.* 30.

337 This is, however, diluted in Christianity by the dogma of the Trinity, which in its traditional interpretation is unacceptable to Jews, Muslims and Bahā'īs. Hans Küng has distanced himself from this traditional interpretation in which Christian theologians have always seen the Proprium of Christianity when postulating the uniqueness and superiority of the Christian religion. He has initiated a new hermeneutics acceptable to the representatives of strict monotheism (cf. Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, pp. 112-127).

338 [*Heilsnotwendigkeit des Glaubens*]; cf. Marc 16:16; John 3:17-18; Luke 12:8; Matt. 10:32; *Qur'ān* 3:132,172; 57:7; 48:29. In Zoroastrianism, cf. *The Dinkard*, vol. I, p. 55; vol. II, p. 63; in the Writings of the Bāb, *Selections* 1:4:4; in the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh, *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 1; *Tablets* 5:4, 11-12; *Lawḥ-i-Aḥmad*, in: *Bahā'ī Prayers*, p. 209; *Lawḥ-i-Ziyārih*, in: *Prayers and Meditations* 180:3.

major religions of the East: Brahmanism, Hinduism and Buddhism.<sup>339</sup>

## XI.

### The New Paradigm: Progressive Revelation

It has been demonstrated in the above that religious history provides impressive evidence for the unity of religions. This unity is not, however, subject to scientific proof. Nor can it be: rational, empirical knowledge can never gain access to the fundamental essence of this unity. Even if one is prepared to admit that despite all the divergencies a unifying principle is evident behind the multitude of forms and their numerous analogies (or at least to accept that many factors speak for such a view) one cannot, nevertheless deduce from these phenomena the reason why the same reality is manifested in such great diversity. The conviction of Symmachus<sup>340</sup> that there must be more than one road to so great a mystery does not take us very far. The metaphysical mystery that could explain the unity for which so much phenomenological evidence exists cannot be unravelled through academic research. In the holy writings of the religions of the past there are clues and hints which can be drawn upon in the search for an explanation.

For the first time, though, a conclusive, rationally acceptable, comprehensive explanation is to be found in the Scripture of the Bāb and of Bahā'u'llāh. God's Revelation in the course of human history is the central, dominant theme. It provides the answer to the question why there is not only one religion. Hence, it is appropriate at this juncture to expatiate briefly upon this fundamental

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339 cf. Heiler, "The History of Religions as a Preparation," p. 154; Heiler, *Die Bedeutung der Mystik für die Weltreligionen*, München 1919.

340 See p. 89.

doctrine of progressive revelation:

## 1. The Hidden God

The Bahā'ī Faith is a monotheistic religion. God is one single God (“He is, and hath from everlasting been, one and alone,... ever-abiding, unchangeable, and self-subsisting,”<sup>341</sup>) absolutely transcendent. God in his essence is indescribable.<sup>342</sup> His being transcends the limitations of numbers,<sup>343</sup> and is an impenetrable mystery that cannot be fathomed by the most pious of mystics or the most profound of philosophers, nor even by the prophets and messengers of God.<sup>344</sup> God is exalted beyond the grasp of the minds of men,<sup>345</sup> exalted beyond all the comparisons<sup>346</sup> and all the descriptions.<sup>347</sup> Every attempt to fathom his essence “hath ended in complete bewilderment<sup>348</sup>... The way is barred, and all seeking rejected<sup>349</sup>... The way is barred and to seek is impiety.”<sup>350</sup> Bahā'u'llāh proclaims the absolute transcendence of God<sup>351</sup>:

The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man's finite mind and are conditioned by its limitations. Ten thousand Prophets, each a Moses, are thunderstruck upon the Sinai of their search at His forbidding voice, ‘Thou shalt never behold

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341 *Gleanings* 94:1.

342 On “Negative and Manifestation Theology,” see Jack McLean, “Prolegomena to a Bahā'ī Theology,” pp. 53ff.

343 *Gleanings* 84:3.

344 *Gleanings* 26:3; *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 104-106 (pp. 98-100).

345 *Gleanings* 26:1; *Tablets* 8:26.

346 *Gleanings* 160:1.

347 *Gleanings* 94:3.

348 *Gleanings* 26:3.

349 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 150 (p. 141).

350 *The Seven Valleys* 43.

351 In the physical realm of *hāhūt* (see footnote 368).

Me!;’ whilst a myriad Messengers, each as great as Jesus, stand dismayed upon their heavenly thrones by the interdiction, ‘Mine Essence thou shalt never apprehend!’ From time immemorial He hath been veiled in the ineffable sanctity of His exalted Self, and will everlastingly continue to be wrapt in the impenetrable mystery of His unknowable Essence. Every attempt to attain to an understanding of His inaccessible Reality hath ended in complete bewilderment, and every effort to approach His exalted Self and envisage His Essence hath resulted in hopelessness and failure.<sup>352</sup>

Hence, God is *deus absconditus*, a hidden God<sup>353</sup>—the “most hidden of the hidden.” Yet he is also *deus revelatus*, “the most manifest of the manifest”<sup>354</sup>: He communicates with humanity through His Revelation in history. The Creator of the universe did not create man and thereafter abandon him to himself. He reveals himself to mankind, speaking through His prophets and messengers. He has entered an eternal, timeless Covenant with humanity. To those who turn to Him and partake of this Covenant he promises salvation: that is on the one hand the blessing of eternal life; and on the other guidance for life on earth.

## 2. The Self-Revealing God

Bahā’u’llāh confirms the Islamic belief whereby God has sent prophets to all peoples in the past; has revealed himself through

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352 *Gleanings* 26:3; cf. also *Gleanings* 148.

353 Isaiah 45:15; *Tablets* 8:31. Jack McLean refers to the “strong apophatic tradition” in early Christianity (“Prolegomena,” p. 54, footnote 56). Also Thomas Aquinas stated *Quid est deus, nescimus* (De pot. q 7a 2 ad 4). Buddha’s silence about God, interpreted as agnosticism or atheism by Western scholars, should be seen in this context (on this subject see: Raimondo Panikkar, *The Silence of God. The Answer of the Buddha*, New York 1989).

354 *Prayers and Meditations* 155; *Qur’ān* 57:3.

them; disclosed His Will and guided them to the Straight Path<sup>355</sup>:

Unto the cities of all nations He hath sent His Messengers,  
Whom He hath commissioned to announce unto men tidings of  
the Paradise of His good pleasure, and to draw them nigh unto  
the Haven of abiding security, the Seat of eternal holiness and  
transcendent glory.<sup>356</sup>

It is evident from the Scripture of Bahā'u'llāh that there have also been messengers passed down to us,<sup>357</sup> who have not been mentioned in the Scriptures and that divine revelation took place even before Adam.<sup>358</sup> The purpose of revelation, the mission of the prophets, always has remained the same: “to summon mankind to the one true God,”<sup>359</sup> “guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth” and “to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High.”<sup>360</sup>

### 3. The Nature of the Manifestations<sup>361</sup>

The founders of all major world religions have played an outstanding role in the belief and in the life of the religious community, as well as in the respective theology. The nature of

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355 See footnote 11 of this same essay.

356 *Gleanings* 76:1; see also *Tablets* 11:2.

357 *Gleanings* 87:6.

358 *Gleanings* 87:1.

359 *Gleanings* 98:6.

360 *Gleanings* 81.

361 For discussion of this term cf. Juan Ricardo Cole, “The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahā'ī Writings,” in: *Bahā'ī Studies*, no. 9.



these historical figures, the mediators of the Great Being<sup>362</sup> to mankind, the prophets and announcers of God's will, has been interpreted in different ways. One interpretation presents them as human beings selected to carry out a divine mission; another presents them as incarnations of the Godhead. Christian theology in its doctrine of the Trinity<sup>363</sup> has identified the salvation figure of the founder—who appeared in human form—with God Himself. Both Judaism<sup>364</sup> and Islam,<sup>365</sup> however, have rejected the Christian doctrines of incarnation and the Trinity, viewing them as a violation of the principle of God's absolute transcendence and as degeneration into polytheism. By way of contrast, their emphasis has been placed on the human status of the prophets.<sup>366</sup> Thus the man-God dichotomy is in constant evidence.

The Scripture of the Bāb and of Bahā'u'llāh convey a much more differentiated view of the nature of God's messengers. The revelation of Bahā'u'llāh is based on a trichotomy, a model of three worlds: the eternally inaccessible world of God (*'ālamu'l-h aqq*), which is “exalted beyond the grasp of the minds of men”,<sup>367</sup> is contrasted with the world of creation (*'ālamu'l-khalq*). Then there is an intermediate world, the world of the revelation of the divine command (*'ālamu'l-amr*), to which belong the salvation figures—the Prophets and Messengers of God.<sup>368</sup> In place of the

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362 *Tablets* 11:3; 11:6; 11:8 etc.

363 On this subject see Louis Henuzet, “Formation du dogme de la Trinité,” in: *La Pensée Bahā'īe* 120 (Automne 1993), p. 6ff.

364 cf. Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Jüdisch-christliches Religionsgespräch*, p. 31ff.; Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, pp. 35ff., 403, 418.

365 cf. *Qur'ān* 2:110; 3:52; 5:76-81; 19:91-94; 112.

366 “Say: In sooth I am only a man like you” (*Qur'ān* 18:110).

367 *Gleanings* 26:1,3; 78:2; 94:3; 160:1; *Tablets* 8:26.

368 Another conceptual scheme of the metaphysical realms, Bahā'u'llāh has delineated in his mystical Tablet *Lawḥ-i-Kullu'ṭ-Ta'ām* (*The Tablet of All Food*), a commentary interpreting *Qur'ān* 3:87 in terms of theosophical Ṣūfism, according to which

Qur'ānic terms *nabī* and *rasūl*, Bahā'u'llāh frequently uses the term *al-maẓharu'l-ilāhī* (Manifestation of God) and thus expresses the concept that these beings are *sui generis*, exalted above

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there are five stages in the hierarchy of metaphysical being: *hāhūt*, *lāhūt*, *jabarūt*, *malakūt* and *nāsūt*. The Arabic text of this Tablet has been published by 'Abdu'l-Ḥamīd Iṣhrāq Khāvarī (ed.) in *Mā'iday-i-āsmānī*, vol. 4, pp. 265-76, Teheran 1971. An annotated preliminary translation into English has been provided and published by Stephen N. Lambden ("A Tablet of Mīrzā Ḥusayn 'Alī Bahā'u'llāh of the early Irāq Period: The Tablet of All Food," in: *Bahā'ī Studies Bulletin* 3.1, June 1984, pp. 4-67). On the historical background of this Tablet see Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā'u'llāh*, vol. 1, pp. 55-60. The Tablet has been discussed also by Moojan Momen in his contribution "Relativism: A Basis for Bahā'ī Metaphysics," in: Moojan Momen (ed.), *Studies in the Bābī & Bahā'ī Religions*, vol. 5, p. 189ff. and by Jack McLean in his article "Prolegomena to a Bahā'ī Theology," p. 53ff.

According to this classification *hāhūt* is the inaccessible realm of the Divine Essence (Lambden, p. 40). In this realm God is known as the Hidden Mystery (cf. *Ṣalāt-i-Kabīr*, *Prayers and Meditations* 183:20). *Lāhūt* is the realm of the first emanation from God in which the divine names and attributes, potential and concealed in the realm of *hāhūt* achieve existence (Momen, *op. cit.*, pp. 190/191). This realm has been named the Heavenly Court (*The Seven Valleys* 49, the All-Glorious Horizon (*Prayers and Meditations* 183:20), the Tongue of Grandeur (*Prayers and Meditations* 183:20), the most exalted Pen (*Tablets* 8:52), the Primal Will (Bāb, *Selections* 4:10:6), the Supreme, Divine Intelligence (*The Seven Valleys* 65), the *lógos* (Momen, *ibid.*). *Jabarūt* is the realm of Divine Decrees (Lambden, p. 40), the realm of the revealed God acting within creation (Momen, *ibid.*). *Malakūt* is the sphere of the angels (*Qur'ān* 6:75; 8:185), the realm of those whom neither business nor commerce distract ... from the remembrance of God (*Qur'ān* 24:37), in the Bahā'ī Scripture called the Concourse on High (*Prayers and Meditations* 183:20; *Tablets* 4:13; 7:8; 8:46; *Gleanings* 129:3; 141:3; 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Selections* 8:1; 19:13), the All-Glorious (*abhā*) Paradise (Bāb, *Selections* 2:34:1; *The Hidden Words*, Persian 18, 19; 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Selections* 8:2; 8:5; 17:6; 42:3; 193:12). *Nāsūt* is the physical world, which is subdivided into the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms. As Momen points out (p. 193ff.) the Manifestations of God exist at all of these various levels except *hāhūt*, whereas man exists on the interface between the realms of *nāsūt* and *malakūt*: "If he chooseth he can live entirely in the world of *nāsūt*," entirely centred "on material possessions and worldly ambition. But if he chooseth, he can detach himself from the physical world and live in the realm of *malakūt*" (*op. cit.*, p. 194). As far as I understand, the classification of *hāhūt* and *lāhūt* corresponds with '*ālamu'l-ḥaqq*'; *nāsūt* with '*ālamu'l-khalq*' and *jabarūt* and *malakūt* with '*ālamu'l-amr*'.

normal human existence. In the realm of creation they have an ontological station above man.

To them a twofold nature has been assigned: their physical nature pertains to the world of matter,<sup>369</sup> and is subject to poverty and afflictions, to hunger, and the ills and chances of this world.<sup>370</sup> The Qur'ān alludes to their human station when reporting the objection: "And they say: 'What sort of apostle is this? He eateth food and walketh in the streets!'"<sup>371</sup> and refers to it when saying: "I am but a man like you."<sup>372</sup> "Am I more than a man, an apostle?"<sup>373</sup> Bahā'u'llāh answered in a similar way when being charged with having laid claim to be God: "This is a gross calumny. I am but a servant of God Who hath believed in Him and His signs and in His Prophets and in His angels."<sup>374</sup> On this human level the Manifestations are "the most distinguished and the most excellent... of all men."<sup>375</sup> They are "Essences of Detachment."<sup>376</sup> Each is a "pure and stainless Soul,"<sup>377</sup> "exalted above the comprehension of men,"<sup>378</sup> the "Day Star of Truth,"<sup>379</sup> the "Day Star of Justice,"<sup>380</sup> The "Sun of majesty and power."<sup>381</sup>

The spiritual station of the Manifestation is "born of the substance of God Himself" (*ilāhī*).<sup>382</sup> His voice is the Voice of God Himself.<sup>383</sup> His knowledge is not acquired,<sup>384</sup> not gained by re-

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369 *Gleanings* 27:4.

370 *Kitāb-i-Iqān* 80 (p. 72).

371 25:7; 17:94; 18:110.

372 18:110.

373 17:94.

374 *Gleanings* 113:18.

375 *Kitāb-i-Iqān* 109 (p. 103).

376 *Kitāb-i-Iqān* 89 (p. 82).

377 *Gleanings* 27:4.

378 *Kitāb-i-Iqān* 32 (p. 35).

379 *Gleanings* 26:3; 27:5; 38; 149.

380 *Gleanings* 46:2; 162:2.

381 *Gleanings* 57:2.

382 *Gleanings* 27:4.

383 *Gleanings* 27:4.

flection<sup>385</sup> or by empiricism. It is not the outcome of effort and study.<sup>386</sup> Rather it is a divine knowledge, the “knowledge of being,”<sup>387</sup> like “the cognizance and consciousness that man has of himself.”<sup>388</sup> The Manifestations of God “are aware of the reality of the mysteries of being;” of “the reality of things;”<sup>389</sup> of the needs and exigencies of the human world. They are like a “Divine and Infallible Physician”<sup>390</sup> who “has His finger on the pulse of mankind,” who “perceiveth the disease and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy.”<sup>391</sup> They all are sinless (*ma‘ṣūm*), made immune from error, guarded against sin.<sup>392</sup> They are infallible in their judgement and in their decree. Thus, the Manifestation is “a Light which is not followed by darkness and a Truth not overtaken by error.”<sup>393</sup>

According to the *Kitāb-i-Īqān*, the Manifestations of God are “sanctified Mirrors”<sup>394</sup> reflecting the light of God. They are “the focal points where the signs, tokens and perfections of that sacred, pre-existent Reality appear in their splendour”<sup>395</sup>:

They are even as a looking-glass, burnished and without stain, which gathereth streams of light out of that Sun, and then scattereth the glory over the rest of creation. In that polished surface, the Sun with all Its majesty standeth clearly revealed. Thus, should the mirrored Sun proclaim, ‘I am the Sun!’ this is

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384 *Some Answered Questions* 40:6.

385 *Some Answered Questions* 40:3.

386 *Some Answered Questions* 40:5.

387 *‘ilmu’l-wujūd* (*Some Answered Questions* 40:4, 6).

388 *Some Answered Questions* 40:4.

389 *Some Answered Questions* 40:7; 58:4.

390 *Gleanings* 106:2; 34:6; 120:3. See also footnote 479.

391 *Gleanings* 106:1.

392 *Tablets* 8:17.

393 *Tablets* 8:17.

394 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 106 (p. 99).

395 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 21:12.

but the truth; and should It cry, ‘I am not the Sun!’ this is the truth as well. And although the Day-Star, with all Its glory, Its beauty, Its perfections, be clearly visible in that mirror without stain, still It hath not come down from Its own lofty station in the realms above, It hath not made Its way into the mirror; rather doth It continue to abide, as It will forever, in the supernal heights of Its own holiness.<sup>396</sup>

Thus it is clear that the divine messenger is a “Manifestation” of God and not his incarnation. The concept of incarnation (*ḥulūl*) has been decidedly rejected by Bahā’u’llāh:

Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it to men<sup>397</sup>... God the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress.<sup>398</sup>

The aspects of God that man is capable of recognizing are only those which are reflected in the Manifestation, who discloses some but not all dimensions of that Ultimate Reality.<sup>399</sup> This opens up a new interpretation for those verses in the Gospel of John, which were formerly interpreted only in the sense of a hypostatic union, such as “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father,”<sup>400</sup> and “I and

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396 *op. cit.*

397 *Gleanings* 20.

398 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 104 (p. 98).

399 “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now” (John 16:12); “All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice” (*The Hidden Words*, Arabic 67).

400 14:9.

my Father are one.”<sup>401</sup> In relation to God, the Manifestations appear as utter nothingness, but in relation to the world of creation (*nāsūt*) they are endowed with all the attributes of God. In a prayer revealed by Bahā’u’llāh he testifies:

When I contemplate, o my God, the relationship that bindeth me to Thee, I am moved to proclaim to all created things ‘verily I am God!;’ and when I consider my own self, lo, I find it coarser than clay!<sup>402</sup>

#### 4. God’s Representatives on Earth

Proceeding from this, it is not difficult to comprehend other statements concerning the nature and mission of the Manifestations. Since the door of the knowledge of God “hath ever been and will continue forever to be, closed in the face of men,”<sup>403</sup> knowledge of God is attainable only through knowledge of the Manifestations. Each of them has been the “representative and mouthpiece of God;”<sup>404</sup> they all have been “Exponents on earth of him who is the central Orb of the universe.”<sup>405</sup> Bahā’u’llāh therefore calls them “the Treasuries of Divine knowledge,” and “the Repositories of celestial wisdom” and declares that through them a grace that is infinite<sup>406</sup> is conveyed to mankind. In provocative and powerful language he has proclaimed the station of the Manifestations as representatives of God:

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401 10:30.

402 Quoted from Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p. 113.

403 *Gleanings* 21.

404 *Gleanings* 28:2.

405 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 106 (p. 99)

406 *Gleanings* 19:3; see also 27:5.

Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself. Whoso turneth away from them, hath turned away from God, and whoso disbelieveth in them, hath disbelieved in God. Every one of them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of His Truth unto every one in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.<sup>407</sup>

Thus, knowledge of God, the “beginning of all things”<sup>408</sup> and “the source of all learning,”<sup>409</sup> can be attained only through “these sanctified Mirrors,” “the Treasures of celestial wisdom.”<sup>410</sup>

Proof of the truth is made evident by the Person of the Manifestation,<sup>411</sup> by the divinely-revealed verses,<sup>412</sup> and by the power of the Manifestation to change people and to make all things new<sup>413</sup>: “Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.”<sup>414</sup> Hence the statement in the *Lawh-i-Aḥmad*:

O people, if ye deny these verses, by what proof have ye believed in God? Produce it, O assemblage of false ones.<sup>415</sup>

## 5. Authority and Sovereignty

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407 *Gleanings* 21.

408 *Gleanings* 2.

409 *Tablets* 10:19.

410 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 106 (pp. 99f.).

411 *Gleanings* 20; 52:2; *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 230 (pp. 208f.).

412 *Gleanings* 121:9.

413 *Tablets* 7:6; 13:10; *Gleanings* 92:1; 99; 147:2; *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 48-50 (pp. 46f.).

414 John 18:37.

415 *Bahā'ī Prayers*, p. 211.

As God's representatives on earth, the Manifestations embody the authority and sovereignty of God: They are "led by the light of unfailing guidance and invested with supreme sovereignty."<sup>416</sup> What they announce is the Will and Command of God. Humanitarian in their content and purpose, intended as they are to promote the well-being of mankind, the teachings and standards of the Manifestations claim to possess unchangeable, final authority. They are thus absolute, unfathomable for reason, above criticism, unquestionable, authoritative, infallible. Bahā'u'llāh has formulated the sovereignty of the Manifestations in the doctrine of the "Most Great Infallibility,"<sup>417</sup> culminating in the statement: "He doeth whatsoever He willeth, and ordaineth whatsoever He pleaseth."<sup>418</sup> The sovereignty of God, like that of the Manifestations, is also demonstrated in that he remains unconstrained in his bidding.<sup>419</sup> The dogma set out in Jewish and in Islamic theology that God by revealing the Torah or the Qur'ān has renounced once and for all his power of legislation thus appears blasphemous.<sup>420</sup>

## 6. The Minor Prophets

Not all prophets are Manifestations. 'Abdu'l-Bahā differentiates between the independent<sup>421</sup> and the dependent ones. The former are the founders such as Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muḥammad, Zarathustra, Buddha, the Bāb and Bahā'u'llāh.

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416 *Gleanings* 27:4; *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 102 (p. 97).

417 *al 'iṣmatu'l-kubrā*, *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 47; *Tablets* 8:17-19.

418 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 7, 47, 131, 157, 161-162; *Tablets* 5:13; 6:56; 7:40; 8:12; 8:17; 8:19; 12:12; 12:17; 14:14; 17:10; *Gleanings* 68:5; 114:18; 129:12.

419 *Ṣalāt al-Kabīr*, in: *7 Prayers and Meditations* 183:10.

420 cf. *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 147-149 (pp. 135-141) in association with *Qur'ān* 5:68; 48:10; see also Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p. 58.

421 *nabīy-bi-istiqlāl*.



They are “the lawgivers and the founders of a new cycle;<sup>422</sup> they establish a new religion and make new creatures of men, ... change the general morals, ... renew the cycle and the Law.”<sup>423</sup> Their appearance is “like the season of spring, which arrays all earthly beings in a new garment, and gives them new life.”<sup>424</sup>

The dependent prophets<sup>425</sup> appear in the shadow of a Manifestation. They are of a different nature, as are the so-called minor prophets of Judaism: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc. They are “followers and promoters and profit by the light of Guidance of a universal Prophet.”<sup>426</sup> They are men who have been called upon to fulfil a divine mission. ‘Abdu’l-Bahā describes this different nature in allegorical form: whereas the light of the Manifestations can be compared with that of the sun, the light of the dependent prophets is like that of the “moon, which is not luminous in itself, but receives its light from the sun.”<sup>427</sup> Bahā’u’llāh testifies that the station which the true believer can attain in his dispensation is the same as the one ordained for such prophets of the House of Israel, as they are not regarded as Manifestations “endowed with constancy.”<sup>428</sup>

## 7. The Unity of the Manifestations

A central doctrine of the Bahā’ī Faith is Bahā’u’llāh’s categorical statement that there is no essential distinction among the individual Manifestations:

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422 *Some Answered Questions* 43:3.

423 *Some Answered Questions* 43:5.

424 *op. cit.* 43:5.

425 *nabīy ghayr mustaqill*; for discussion of these terms cf. Nicola Towfigh, *Schöpfung und Offenbarung*, p. 171.

426 *Some Answered Questions* 43:4.

427 *Ibid.*

428 *World Order*, p. 111.

The essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the same. Their unity is absolute. God, the Creator, sayeth: There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message. They all have but one purpose; their secret is the same secret.<sup>429</sup>

Their messages are “fundamentally the same.”<sup>430</sup> They differ only in the “intensity of their revelation” and “in the comparative potency of their Light.”<sup>431</sup> Therefore “to prefer one in honour to another, to exalt certain ones above the rest”<sup>432</sup> is to diverge from this truth. They are all the reflection of His Will and Purpose:

Whoso maketh the slightest possible difference between their persons, their words, their messages, their acts and manners, hath indeed disbelieved in God, hath repudiated His signs, and betrayed the Cause of His Messengers.<sup>433</sup>

Accordingly, to reject *one* of the Manifestations means to reject them all:

He who turns away from this Beauty hath also turned away from the Messengers of the past and showeth pride towards God from all eternity to all eternity.<sup>434</sup>

From this unity of the messengers the mystic unity of the revealed religions can be deduced:

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429 *Gleanings* 34:3.

430 *Ibid.*

431 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 110 (p. 104); *Gleanings* 34:4; *Qur’ān* 2:254.

432 *Gleanings* 34:3; 24; *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 161 (p. 152); *Qur’ān* 2:285.

433 *Gleanings* 24.

434 *Lawḥ-i-Aḥmad*, in: *Bahā’ī Prayers*, p. 212.

These principles and laws, these firmly established and mighty systems, have proceeded from One Source, and are the 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.<sup>435</sup>

## 8. The Relativity of Divine Revelation

There are, of course, differences in the historical missions of the prophets. Each was the bearer of a specific message.<sup>436</sup> Each was faced with a different set of conditions on earth which formed the context for the changes and new laws which he revealed. Here again the moon is used as an allegory: Bahā' u' llāh compares revelation with the light of the moon

that sheddeth its radiance upon the earth. Though every time it appeareth, it revealeth a fresh measure of its brightness, yet its inherent splendour can never diminish, nor can its light suffer extinction.<sup>437</sup>

The variation in the intensity of its light is “not inherent in the light itself,” but should rather “be attributed to the varying receptivity of an ever-changing world.”<sup>438</sup> This is the meaning of the Qur'ānic verse: “Some of the apostles we have endowed more highly than others.”<sup>439</sup>

Thus, we are presented here with a concept of decisive significance: the dependent and relative nature of revelation.<sup>440</sup> As

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435 *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 18 (p. 13).

436 *Gleanings* 31; 34:4.

437 *Gleanings* 34:4.

438 *Gleanings* 34:5.

439 *Qur'ān* 2:254.

440 On the relativity of religious truth see pp. 60, 111, 137ff., 154; cf. Moojan Momen, “Relativism: A Basis for Bahā'ī Metaphysics,” in: Moojan Momen (ed.), *Studies*

God's means of educating mankind, revelation is related to the capacity of the people to whom it is directed. This capacity differs according to the spiritual, cultural and social level of development of those people. This theme appears as a *leitmotiv* throughout the Scripture of Bahā'u'llāh. In *The Hidden Words* we read, for instance:

All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice.<sup>441</sup>

And elsewhere he states:

Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity.<sup>442</sup>

Bahā'u'llāh explains the varying extent of the revelations by means of an analogy with the light of the sun. He points out how feeble the sun's radiance is at sunrise, how its power and warmth gradually increase until it reaches its zenith, and how all created things have the ability to adapt to the increasing potency of its light:

Were it, all of a sudden, to manifest the energies latent within it, it would, no doubt, cause injury to all created things... If the Sun of Truth were all of a sudden to reveal at the earliest stages of its manifestation, the full measure of the potencies which the

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*in the Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions*, vol. 5, p. 185.

441 Arabic 67.

442 *Gleanings* 38; cf. 89:2-4; *Tablets* 9:11.

providence of the Almighty hath bestowed upon it, the earth of human understanding would waste away and be consumed; for men's hearts would neither sustain the intensity of its revelation, nor be able to mirror forth the radiance of its light.<sup>443</sup>

The idea of revelation as a progressively unfolding process is also conveyed in another metaphor:

Words are revealed according to capacity so that the beginners may progress. The milk must be given according to measure so that the babe of the world may enter into the Realm of Grandeur and be established in the Court of Unity.<sup>444</sup>

This idea is also to be found in the Gospel. Christ did not reveal everything, but rather only that which accorded with the capacity of the people around him:

I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of Truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.<sup>445</sup>

God's revelation in the course of history is a continual, cyclically recurring phenomenon; it is a process of dialogue in which mankind is involved. The Word of God resembles a seed.<sup>446</sup> It is like "a sapling, whose roots have been implanted

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443 *Gleanings* 38.

444 *Lawḥ-i-Ittihād*, cf. A. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā'u'llāh*, vol. 4, p. 192.

445 John 16:12-13. Bahā'u'llāh testifies that the Spirit of Truth, which has been interpreted in Christian theology as the events of Pentecost (Acts 2ff.), is none other than himself: "Verily, He Who is the Spirit of Truth is come to guide you unto all truth... This is the Word which the Son concealed, when to those around Him He said: 'Ye cannot bear it now'" (*Tablets* 2:12, 9; cf. Tablet to Pope Pius IX, in: *The Proclamation of Bahā'u'llāh*, p. 84 and also *Gleanings* 116:1).

446 cf. Matt. 13:24, 38; Mark 4:26; Luke 8:11.

in the hearts of men.”<sup>447</sup> The sapling grows, and growth means to assimilate, to take in external substances. The Word of God becomes the foundation of a new way of thinking; it enters into human thought processes which, absorbing diverse currents of thought, lead to the establishment of new constructs of ideas. Since human beings can only ever “know in part,”<sup>448</sup> it is inevitable that the homogeneous and the heterogeneous, the true and the false are assimilated until at the time of the harvest,<sup>449</sup> the wheat is separated from the chaff. The new Manifestation—the new Book of God—is then “the unerring Balance established amongst men” on which all “are weighed;”<sup>450</sup> through which “truth shall be distinguished from error”<sup>451</sup> and “judged between truth and falsehood.”<sup>452</sup> All *the True, the Good and the Beautiful* (Plato) “he hath stored away in the vessels of justice,” and all that is false has been “cast into fire.”<sup>453</sup>

The revelation of Bahā’u’llāh has demonstrated this in all clarity. Many of his works were written in response to questions asked of him by theologians<sup>454</sup> who desired to know his verdict concerning controversial issues. In each case Bahā’u’llāh “distinguished truth from error.” Hence, in his mystical work *The Seven Valleys*,<sup>455</sup> he repudiated the antinomist or pantheistic excesses of the Ṣufī mystics. At the same time he confirmed many fundamental ideas of the mystic teachings emanating from Islam, in particular Farīdu’-d-Dīn ‘Attar’s image of the “seven valleys” through which

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447 *Tablets* 7:33.

448 cf. I Cor. 13:9.

449 Matt. 13:30, 39.

450 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 99, 183.

451 *Lawḥ-i-Aḥmad*, in: *Bahā’ī Prayers*, p. 210.

452 *Tablets* 14:12.

453 Tablet to Pope Pius IX, in: *The Proclamation of Bahā’u’llāh*, p. 86.

454 For instance, the *Kitāb-i-Īqān*, *The Seven Valleys*, *Lawḥ-i-Kullu’ṭ-Ṭa’ām*, *Lawḥ-i-Āyiy-i-Nūr*, *Javāhiru’l-Asrār*; cf. A. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā’u’llāh*, vol. 1, pp. 55 ff., 96ff., 125ff., 149ff.

455 cf. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā’u’llāh*, vol. 1, p. 96.

the soul progresses on its path to God. To a large extent, Bahā'-'u'llāh adopted the same terminology,<sup>456</sup> quoting from mystical poetic writings<sup>457</sup> and even from Arab proverbial wisdom.

Thus, human thought has entered into divine revelation through the sovereign confirmation of God (“He chooseth; and none may question His choice.”<sup>458</sup>) This shows that the entire intellectual heritage of mankind has not been cast onto the rubbish heap of history as a result of the new revelation. Rather, in so far as it has been confirmed by that revelation, it has become a component of the revealed truth. Many of the thoughts of Aristotle (who is highly praised in the Scripture,<sup>459</sup>) that were passed on via Islamic philosophy—such as his ethics<sup>460</sup> and his cosmogony<sup>461</sup>—in partially modified form have become elements of the new revelation. Hence, man’s cultural mission<sup>462</sup> does not begin completely anew at the advent of every new revelation.

## 9. The Purpose of Revelation: the Education of Humanity

The purpose of divine revelation is the education of humanity<sup>463</sup>:

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456 For example, the three stages in the life of a Ṣufī: *sharī‘at* (religious law), *tarīqat* (path), *ḥaqīqat* (truth) or the Ṣufī concepts for the realms of being *hāhūt*, *lā-hūt*, *jabarūt*, *malakūt*, *nāsūt* in his mystical commentary *Lawḥ-i-Kullu’-t-Ta‘ām* (*Tablet of All Food*; see Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā’u’llāh*, vol. 1, p. 55ff.).

457 For instance, from the *Mathnavī* of Jalālu’d-Din Rūmī (1207–1273) and from the poems of Shamsu’d-Din Muḥammad Hāfiz (1320-1390).

458 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 7.

459 *Tablets* 9:26; cf. also ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Promulgation*, pp. 327, 348, 356.

460 *‘ilmu’l-akhlāq*.

461 cf. *Tablets* 9:8; *Gleanings* 78:1; 82:10; 26:2.

462 “All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization” (*Gleanings* 109:2).

463 In 1780, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published a work entitled *The Education of the Human Race*, in which he developed the idea of progressive divine revelation, based on the teachings of Joachim de Fiore (1130-1202). He was awaiting a new

From the heaven of God's Will, and for the purpose of ennobling the world of being and of elevating the minds and souls of men, hath been sent down that which is the most effective instrument for the education of the whole human race.<sup>464</sup>

The Manifestations are therefore often referred to in the Scripture of Bahā'u'llāh as "Divine Educators."<sup>465</sup> Claudia Gollmer has summed up this concept fittingly in the phrase "Revelation is education."<sup>466</sup> Since education is a continuous process, revelation is also continuous and progressive. Bahā'u'llāh himself speaks of a process of "progressive revelation."<sup>467</sup>

Known religious history began with Adam,—a Prophet according to Islamic and Bahā'ī teachings. It ended with Muḥammad, who in the view of traditional religious history, is seen as the only founder of a religion to project into the early mediaeval period. According to Bahā'ī teachings, world history proceeds in universal cycles within which the founders of the religions have each created an historical hiatus marked by the inauguration of a new calendar. The universal cycle that began with Adam—the prophetic cycle—ended with Muḥammad, who was the last in this series and therefore designated himself as the "seal of the prophets."<sup>468</sup> He announced the great upheaval at the "time of the end, the day of judgement,"<sup>469</sup> the "great news."<sup>470</sup> With Bahā'u'llāh

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era, in which the *Torah* and the Gospel, as promised in the Revelation of St. John (14:6), would be superseded by an Everlasting Gospel, an era of reason and of self-consummation of man, thus at the same time the fulfilment of the Christian revelation (cf. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 208ff.).

464 *Tablets* 7:13; *Gleanings* 93:14; 126:1.

465 *Gleanings* 82:7.

466 *Die metaphysischen und theologischen Grundlagen der Erziehungslehren in der Bahā'ī-Religion*, p. 102ff.

467 *Gleanings* 31.

468 *Qur'ān* 33:40.

469 *Yaumu'l-qiyāmah*, *Qur'ān* 2:85; 2:113; 2:174; 2:212; 3:55; 75:1 etc.

470 *an-naba' al-'azīm*, *Qur'ān* 78:2.



a new world era has begun, a new universal cycle in which the “prophetic cycle”<sup>471</sup> has been fulfilled. The “day of resurrection”<sup>472</sup> is the advent of a new revelation.<sup>473</sup>

Religious history has taken its course in accordance with the divine Plan for the salvation of mankind. Each revelation has been “definitely fore-ordained”<sup>474</sup> by God, and is “a reflection of His Will and Purpose.”<sup>475</sup> As long as the earth had not yet become a communicational unity and humanity was separated by seas, mountains and deserts, cultures developed independently of one another and peoples knew little about each other. Sometimes revelation took place in different places in the same epoch.<sup>476</sup> As the inhabited world came to be a single entity, revelations emerged from a relatively small geographical area, the Middle East, at intervals of about 1000 years.<sup>477</sup>

## 10. The Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions

According to the teachings of Bahā’u’llāh, religion is a shaping force, encompassing every aspect of human existence. It is the “Straight Path” for the individual and for society. It links the individual with his Creator and shows him the way to salvation. It moulds this world in accordance with the Will of God as re-

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471 “When God sent forth His Prophet Muḥammad, on that day the termination of the prophetic cycle was foreordained in the knowledge of God” (The Bāb, *Selections*, 6:11:5; *Gleanings* 25).

472 See footnote 138.

473 This subject has been elucidated by the Bāb in his *Persian Bayān* (2:7; see *Selections* 3:35:1).

474 *Gleanings* 31.

475 *Gleanings* 24.

476 The Jewish prophets after Moses (circa 1250 B. C.), Zarathustra (circa 600–538 B. C.) and Buddha (circa 560–480 B. C.) were, for instance, partly contemporary. The Hindu holy scriptures, the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, also came into being around 800 B. C., and the *Bhagavad Gītā* around the fifth century B. C.

477 The period between the Christian and Islamic revelations was approximately 600 years; that between the Islamic and the Bahā’ī revelations was 1260 years.

vealed in His Law. Society, too, is granted salvation from its moribund structures. Divine revelation is the foundation of a new order, integrating and stabilising society. At the same time it is a framework providing orientation, conveying meaning, indicating goals and the paths to their attainment, and laying a sound basis for morality. This function of religion in the immanent world is testified to in the verse:

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.<sup>478</sup>

In the Scripture we frequently come across the allegory of the divine physician who, in his superior wisdom, examines the ailing body of mankind, diagnoses its sickness and prescribes the appropriate remedy.<sup>479</sup> Thus, salvation is offered not only to the individual grace-seeking soul but also to the collective, to the entire human race.

The two-dimensional nature of revelation is not the result of some complicated exegesis: it was clearly defined by Bahā'u'llāh:

God's purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding.

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<sup>478</sup> *Gleanings* 109:2.

<sup>479</sup> *Gleanings* 34:6, 106:1, 120:1, 16:3. This metaphor is not new in religious history. Buddha, too, saw himself as a physician and the whole world as a hospital; He also spoke of prescribing the remedy and determining the dose according to the patient's condition (quoted from Karl Eugen Neumann, *Übertragungen aus dem Pali Kanon* vol. III: Sammlungen in Versen [Sutta Nipata], p. 369 [*Brahmadatto* no. 444], p. 417 [*Adhimutto* no. 722]; cf. also *Majjhima Nikaya* I, 426; Wilhelm Gundert, *Der Buddhismus*, p. 44).

The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established.<sup>480</sup>

The horizontal dimension is the variable, so to speak. It is in this part of the respective revelations, the purpose of which is the shaping of a world in continuous flux, that the major differences between the religions are apparent. Social norms diverge in accordance with the various cultural conditions. Laws concerning marriage and the family; of inheritance; the stipulations of criminal and trade law; as well as forms of worship, vary greatly. The diversity of religions is manifested in these features. Here, revelation reflects the wide range of historical and cultural backgrounds. For this reason, Bahā'u'llāh says:

Know thou that in every age and dispensation all divine ordinances are changed and transformed according to the requirement of the time, except the law of love, which, like a fountain, always flows and is never overtaken by change.<sup>481</sup>

The term *love* is used here as a *pars pro toto* standing for the unchanging core of revelation.

The vertical dimension of revelation is so to speak the constant, the “Holy of Holies,”<sup>482</sup> the essentially unchanging heart of religion. It does not change nor alter and will never be abrogated.<sup>483</sup> It is “the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.”<sup>484</sup> It consists of “faith, knowledge, certitude, justice, piety, righteousness, trustworthiness, love of God, benevolence, purity, detachment, humility, meekness, patience and constancy. It

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480 *Gleanings* 34:5.

481 Quoted in Esslemont, *Bahā'u'llāh and the New Era*, p. 163.

482 *Some Answered Questions* 11:9.

483 *Ibid.*

484 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 182.

shows mercy to the poor, defends the oppressed, gives to the wretched and uplifts the fallen.”<sup>485</sup> These divine qualities will never be abolished, but will be renewed in each of the different cycles, because human virtues wane and “only the form subsists.”<sup>486</sup>

## 11. Divine Reformation

The religion of God is *one* religion, but it must be renewed.<sup>487</sup>

Renewal is necessary because everything on earth is subject to deterioration and decay. In every age people have dulled the original light of their faith through error, misunderstanding, doctrinal additions and power-claims. The history of religion is the history of believers in religion. It is human history; it is the history of sinful man. It is therefore inevitable that all religions have been through centrifugal processes in the course of their historical development, and that they have gradually become encrusted and deformed, hence losing their original potency. This is an inexorable, inherent process. Using an analogy to the seasons, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā pointed out that all religions undergo a cycle of growth, blossoming and harvesting, followed by decline and decay.<sup>488</sup> Human reformation is unable to re-awaken the original, vital spirit. In this sense, the revelation of Bahā’u’llāh is the judgement on the previous religions, the “day of ingathering.”<sup>489</sup> But it is not, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahā emphasizes, a new path to salvation: Rather it is

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485 *Some Answered Questions* 11:9.

486 *op. cit.* 11:10.

487 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 23:3.

488 *Some Answered Questions* 14:1-10.

489 “Verily, the day of ingathering has come, and all things have been separated from each other. He hath stored away that which he chose in the vessels of justice, and cast into fire that which He befitteth it” (Bahā’u’llāh, Tablet to Pope Pius IX., with

the old path, made free of human imaginations and prejudices, cleared of the evils of conflict and disagreements, and once again made straight for the true seeker, that he might set foot upon it with utter conviction and see that the Word of God is one Word, even if its Speakers were many.<sup>490</sup>

This is the eternal, “the one and indivisible religion of God,”<sup>491</sup> referred to in the Qur’ān as *Islam*. This idea of divine reformation through progressive revelation is clearly formulated in the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and a rise of unrighteousness, o Bhārata, then I send forth Myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age.<sup>492</sup>

## 12. The Creative Word

Religion is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs, it is the teachings of God, teachings which constitute the very life of mankind<sup>493</sup>... A power above and beyond the powers of nature must needs be brought to bear, to change this black darkness into light, and these hatreds and resentments, grudges and spites, these endless wrangles and wars, into fellowship and love amongst all the peoples of the earth. This power is none other than the breathings of the Holy Spirit and the mighty in-

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distinct allusion to Matt. 13:30, quoted from *The Proclamation of Bahā’u’llāh*, p. 86).

490 Quoted in “*Sonne der Wahrheit*,” 1947, vol. 1, p. 1.

491 Bāb, *Selections* 2:24:2.

492 IV, 7 and 8.

493 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 23:6.

flow of the Word of God.<sup>494</sup>

Seen in this way, religion is not static but dynamic. In its origin it is the most revolutionary, the most radical of all forces.<sup>495</sup> All the founders of the world's major religions have inevitably broken with past traditions; with obsolete, outworn forms and institutions; and with a ritualistic conservatism divested of any meaning, in order to protect the remaining substance of the religion of God and adapt this to the requirements of a new era. This renewal has always been associated with a new outpouring of potency, a new surge of divine power, capable of changing and integrating people, renewing society, establishing a new order and ultimately in the fullness of time, causing a new culture to emerge. That creative power testified to in the prologue to the Gospel of John and inherent in the *lógos* is—beyond all the doctrines, commandments, rites and customs—the true *movens* of religion. Bahā'u'llāh says of the power immanent in the Word of God that through it every human infirmity was banished;<sup>496</sup> that it restores the dying vitality of men's belief in God;<sup>497</sup> and that the whole of the human race can be illumined with the light of unity<sup>498</sup>:

Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame.<sup>499</sup>

Besides the idea of divine reformation and of the adaptation of religion to a higher level of understanding and to a changed

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494 *op. cit.* 23:8.

495 Radical not in its means and methods but in the original sense of the word (*radix* = root), i. e., renewal from the roots.

496 *Gleanings* 36:3.

497 *Gleanings* 99.

498 *Gleanings* 131:3.

499 *Gleanings* 74.

world, the concept inherent in this new impulse is the main reason for cyclically recurring, progressive revelation. Without this renewal of the divine light “which lighteth every man”<sup>500</sup> mankind can not survive.

Alas! the world will perish. Alas! the world will come to destruction, were this Accomplished One, this Exalted One, this Supremely Awakened One of a mind to keep still and not publish the Teaching abroad!,

according to the Buddhist canon.<sup>501</sup> And Bahā’u’llāh says,

Were this revelation to be withdrawn, all would perish.<sup>502</sup>

### 13. A Paradigm Shift

This view of the operation of divine revelation opens up a new hermeneutic dimension of religious history. It is not restricted to the salvation figures mentioned in the Bible and in the Qur’ān—from Adam to Muḥammad. The religion of Zarathustra and the Far Eastern religions of Buddhism and Hinduism also have had their origin in divine salvation figures and in the Word of God (even though the founders of Hinduism are hidden in the mists of history and the original revelation set down in the holy Scriptures of these religions is even less reliably preserved than the revelation as found in the Bible).<sup>503</sup>

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500 John 1:9.

501 *Majjhima-Nikaya* XXVI (p. 145).

502 *Gleanings* 93:14.

503 With reference to Buddha, cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions* 43:7ff.: “The founder of Buddhism was a wonderful soul. He established the Oneness of God, but later the original principles of His doctrines gradually disappeared, and ignorant customs and ceremonials arose and increased until they finally ended in the worship of statues and images”; cf. also Helen Hornby, *Lights of Guidance* no.

Given the premise that prophets have been sent to all peoples and that many of their names are unknown to us, it is not difficult to acknowledge that the entire religious tradition of mankind has had its ultimate origin in divine revelation. This is so in spite of the fact that the visible phenomena are now so different from their original forms as to render their association unrecognizable. Even in the polytheistic pantheon there was usually a god who was greater than all the others, the “unknown God.”<sup>504</sup> The multitude of other gods were originally divine attributes of this highest Being. They were personified and thence took on an identity of their own. Among the so-called primitive religions, too, we observe truths, moral norms and even prophecies concerning the “time of the end,” cloaked in obscure cult practices.

Furthermore, the history of man’s salvation through God—his *Heilsgeschichte*—is a continuum: it is open to the future. Bahā’-u’llāh has clearly rejected all claims to the finality of revelation.<sup>505</sup> In the *Sūratu ’ṣ-Ṣabr* he has revealed the verse:

God hath sent down His messengers to succeed to Moses and Jesus, and He will continue to do so till ‘the end that hath no end;’ so that His grace may, from the heaven of Divine bounty, be continually vouchsafed to mankind.<sup>506</sup>

It is “a process that hath had no beginning and will have no end.”<sup>507</sup> There will never be a religion that will not “be renewed in the days to come.”<sup>508</sup> Thus, all claims to exclusivity and finality are shown to be unfounded.

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504 cf. Acts 17:23.

505 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 148 (pp. 136-139).

506 Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p. 116.

507 The Bāb, *Selections* 3:34:1.

508 *Ibid.* 6:9:8.



A new theological paradigm is manifested in this: The old ecclesiastical paradigm, formulated in the Apostle's Creed, of the unique drama of salvation through God's incarnate son (who lived among men, suffered on Calvary, rose to Heaven, redeemed the world of its sins and reconciled God with humanity), stands in contrast to the new one: The new paradigm depicts a divine economy of salvation, a continuous process of the education of the human race by the prophets and messengers of God: a God who reveals himself to mankind at historical intervals. In this model, the unity of religions has much stronger foundations than could ever possibly be established through the empirical and phenomenological investigation of religions. The principle of the absolute unity of the Manifestations logically leads one to conclude that in the recognized phenomenological unity of religions, a transcendental unity exists, a unity emanating from the divine Plan for man's salvation:

These principles and laws, these firmly established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source and are the 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.<sup>509</sup>

Thus the plurality of religions is the result of progressive revelation. All of them originate from God, even though the influence of their diverging historical development is conspicuous in their current forms. The epiphanies of their founders, the divine messengers, are the decisive moments in history: *The Tide of Fortune*.<sup>510</sup>

The unity paradigm constitutes a positive basis for the study of religions: they are taken seriously, revered and portrayed in a sym-

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509 *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 18 (p. 13).

510 "*Sternstunden der Menschheit*," title of an essay by Stefan Zweig, published 1929.

sympathetic light. They are regarded in no other light except as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, divine and indivisible.<sup>511</sup> They are viewed to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value for mankind.<sup>512</sup> Therefore, the Bahā'ī Faith is

far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems. Its avowed, unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to coordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations.<sup>513</sup>

This is not mere indifference, an “*Anything goes*” approach (which Kūng<sup>514</sup> rightly criticises), but the acknowledgement that that which has developed over long historical periods and is testified to in frequently interrupted tradition originates from the same source: the revelation of the living God. It is the realization that the sometimes major differences, even stark contradictions, in doctrine, societal order and forms of worship are historically conditioned. Consider Christianity alone: Its basis lies in one figure, Christ, and in one set of teachings, the Gospel. Today it is not a monolithic religion, but rather exists in a multitude of forms with incompatible doctrinal contradictions.<sup>515</sup> How much more likely then is this to be the case re-

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511 Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p. 114.

512 Shoghi Effendi, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

513 Shoghi Effendi, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

514 *Christianity and the World Religions*, p. XVIII.

515 These include, for example, Catholics, Unitarians, Calvinists, the Greek Orthodox Church, Copts, Mormons, the Salvation Army, Jehovah's Witnesses etc.—the list could be extended indefinitely. The traditions are so diverse and dogmatic differ-

garding revelations that have emerged at various times, among very different peoples with extremely varied spiritual traditions and cultural conditions and which have then undergone widely divergent paths of historical development! Wilfred Cantwell Smith has aptly stated:

It is not the case that all religions are the same. The historian notes that not even one religion is the same, century after century, from one country to another, or from village to city.<sup>516</sup>

The light of truth does not come to us as a sharply focused ray but in a refracted and dispersed form, since “no living thing can resist the transforming effect of time.”<sup>517</sup>

When considering religions it is, of course, essential to separate the wheat from the chaff. Hans Küng has established a principle for so doing: “Nothing of value in the other religions is to be denied, but neither is anything of no value to be uncritically accepted.”<sup>518</sup> What yardstick, however, is to be used to making such judgements? Logically, it is the latest revelation, for it has once again cleared the “Straight Path” of historical ballast. That we should consider other faiths from the point of view of the dispensation of Bahā’u’llāh is not surprising but merely consistent. All religions have done so: all have interpreted past religious history and existing religious tradition in the light of the new revelation. That some things then appear differently, and venerated dogmas of orthodox belief are shaken, is as inevitable as is the vexation that arises when on the “day of ingathering” the weeds are collected and cast into

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ences among the communities so entrenched that even the major churches do not have a common Eucharist.

516 *Towards a World Theology*, p. 4.

517 Adolf von Harnack, *Kirchenverfassung*, p. 87.

518 *Christianity and the World Religions*, p. XVIII.

the fire.<sup>519</sup> Moreover, examination of the widely varying traditions of other religions also helps one to develop a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of one's own faith.

#### 14. The Eye of Oneness

Bahā'u'llāh also explains why only a few comprehend the unity of religions and why the majority fails to recognize the light of truth radiating from their holy Scriptures. It lies not in the light itself, but in the eye of the beholder. Whoever looks with the "eye of oneness"<sup>520</sup> perceives "the light of singleness reflected over all creation."<sup>521</sup> Differences in appearance depend on the object on which light shines. The sun appears in a mirror as a disc and in crystal as fire, whereas other objects only sense the effect of the light.<sup>522</sup> Those who direct their attention only to the differences, and have constrained "the lands of knowledge within the wall of self and passion, and clouded them with ignorance and blindness,"<sup>523</sup> have "strayed far from the jewelled wisdom of the lucid Faith of the Lord of messengers"<sup>524</sup>... Such is the worth of the people of this age!"<sup>525</sup> regrets Bahā'u'llāh. As a result of this approach "conflict hath prevailed among the creatures, and a darksome dust from limited souls hath hid the world."<sup>526</sup> That is the reason why there are some who dwell upon the plane of oneness, "and some inhabit

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519 cf. Matt. 13:30.

520 Bahā'u'llāh, *The Seven Valleys* 33.

521 *Ibid.*

522 *op. cit.* 34

523 *op. cit.* 36.

524 *Ibid.*

525 *Ibid.*

526 *op. cit.* 39.

the realms of limitation, and some the grades of self; while others are completely veiled.”<sup>527</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahā, too, attributes the fruitless interreligious strife to the fact that people cling to superficialities and forget the simple truth:

From the continual imitations of ancient and worn-out ways, the world had grown dark... The fundamentals of the divine Teachings had passed from memory; their pith and heart had been totally forgotten, and the people were holding on to husks.<sup>528</sup>

What is different are “the outward practices of religion”, and it is they

that cause disputes and enmity—while the reality is always one and the same. The reality is the truth and truth has no division. Truth is God’s guidance. It is the light of the world. It is love. It is mercy.<sup>529</sup>

Thus it depends on the individual whether he is able to perceive this reality or is unmoved by the truth:

Every one who is of the truth heareth my voice,

reads the Gospel of St. John,<sup>530</sup> and in the Sermon on the Mount Christ says:

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.<sup>531</sup>

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527 *op. cit.* 40.

528 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 205:1.

529 *Paris Talks* 39:13.

530 18:37.

Bahā'u'llāh has also spoken of this purity of heart, the radical openness for the truth, even if it may be far different from that which one has imagined. It can be perceived only by those who cleanse their hearts “from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge”, purifying it to the extent that

no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth.<sup>532</sup>

According to Bahā'u'llāh whoever is not prepared to do this is like a beetle to which “a sweet fragrance seemeth foul,”<sup>533</sup> or like a person suffering from a cold who cannot partake of “the sweet savours of holiness”<sup>534</sup>:

To the man sick of a rheum a pleasant perfume is as naught. Wherefore, it hath been said for the guidance of the ignorant: ‘Cleanse thou the rheum from out thine head and breathe the breath of God instead.’<sup>535</sup>

Perhaps Bahā'u'llāh was referring to the judgement of Western orientalist on the Qur'ān when he revealed the following verse in the *Kitāb-i-Īqān*:

Yea, the blind can perceive naught from the sun except its heat, and the arid soil hath no share of the showers of mercy. ‘Marvel not if in the Qur'ān the unbeliever perceiveth naught but the

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531 Matt. 5:8.

532 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 213 (p. 192).

533 *The Seven Valleys* 38.

534 *The Hidden Words*, Persian 46.

535 *The Seven Valleys* 38.

trace of letters, for in the sun, the blind findeth naught but heat.<sup>536</sup>

## 15. The Spirit of Fraternity

It is a logical consequence of Bahā'u'llāh's unity paradigm that he emphasizes again and again a commandment—unique among the religious Scriptures of mankind—that will purge and purify the peoples of the world from the strife and dissension which religious differences provoke.<sup>537</sup> In the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* we read:

Consort with all religions with amity and concord;<sup>538</sup>

in the *Lawḥ-i-Dunyā*:

Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished.<sup>539</sup>

In the *Tablet Tarāzāt* we are exhorted to consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship, and all peoples are admonished to observe tolerance and righteousness.<sup>540</sup> The warning about religious fanaticism—Bahā'u'llāh calls it “a world-devouring fire” and a “desolating afflict-

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536 230 (p. 209).

537 *Tablets* 6:40.

538 144.

539 *Tablets* 7:13.

540 *Tablets* 4:10, 12.

ion”<sup>541</sup>—is combined with urgent appeals for cosmopolitanism and loving affection for all peoples and nations of the world:

Consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and the regeneration of nations.<sup>542</sup>

What is demanded here is much more than tolerance, more than merely “putting up with” others: it is active, loving association with people of other religions “with joy and radiance”. Bahā’-u’llāh says:

Blessed are such as hold fast to the cord of kindness and tender mercy and are free from animosity and hatred.<sup>543</sup>

As already mentioned, Hans Küng has acknowledged interreligious dialogue as being an indispensable prerequisite for world peace. There can be no world peace without religious peace.<sup>544</sup> Bahā’u’llāh’s unity paradigm and his commandment to his followers to consort in a loving spirit with the believers of other faiths is a much more stable basis for this indispensable dialogue<sup>545</sup> than simply utilitarian motives or the acknowledgement of necessity.

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541 *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 19 (p. 14).

542 *Tablets* 4:11.

543 *Ibid.*

544 cf. Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, p. 443.

545 On the conditions of an interreligious dialogue see Jack McLean, “Prolegomena to a Bahā’ī Theology,” in: *The Journal of Bahā’ī Studies* 5.1, p. 44ff.; Seena Fazel, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahā’ī Faith—Some Preliminary Observations,” in: Jack McLean (ed.), *Revisioning the Sacred*, pp. 127-152; Udo Schaefer, “Bahā’-u’llāh’s Unity Paradigm: A Contribution to Interfaith Dialogue on a Global Ethic,” in: *Dialogue and Universalism* 6.11-12/1996, pp. 23-41.



Before the terrible religious wars in Europe, and four hundred years before the revelation of Bahā'u'llāh, Nicolaus Cusanus called imploringly for this spirit of unity and love. In his work *De pace fidei* (1453), he discussed the contradictions existing among religions. He propounded that a large gathering could not exist without a great number of contradictions; that God sent to different nations different prophets and teachers, and that it was inherent in human nature that “venerated practices which had become second nature were ultimately defended as the truth.” He realized that God alone could help mankind out of this disastrous strife, and, to this end, he beseeched God’s grace in the following prayer:

*Thou art He, o God, who is sought in the different religions in different ways and is named with different names, for Thou remainest as Thou art, incomprehensible to all and ineffable. Be Thou gracious and reveal Thy countenance... If Thou wouldst be so gracious, then the sword, envious hatred, and all evil will cease and all will realize that there is but one religion in the variety of the religious customs.*<sup>546</sup>

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546 “*Si sic facere dignaberis, cessabit gladius et odii livor et quaeque mala, et cognoscent omnes, quomodo non est nisi una religio in rituum varietate*” (cap. 1, fol. 114 V).



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