

New Religions and Religious Movements The Common Heritage ¹

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The Nineteenth Century

The student of modern religions and religious movements is confronted with the outstanding phenomena of the occurrence of intensive religious activity in the late eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century, which was particularly prolific in this regard. Almost throughout the century, one witnesses the birth of one spiritual venture or another, radiating into the subsequent century. This was not limited only to religion, but religion was one of the major features of this spiritual and intellectual eruption, which was not restricted to one country, or one continent, or one school of thought. The Hasidut movement in Eastern Europe revolutionized the Jewish world, and brought mystical thought and practice into the midst of everyday life and religious practice. In Sunnī Islam an intellectual movement of revivalism and renewal swept from India and South-east Asia to North Africa, creating such interesting extremities, as meeting the challenge of modernity in Western tools on the one hand, and digging deep into piety in the style of the Wahhābis on the other. As the thirteenth Islamic (*hijrah*) century drew to its end, and the fourteenth century began toward the end of 1882, the messianic expectations exploded in the form of messianic-*mahdist* movements, the most famous of which was the appearance of the Mahdī in the Sudan, Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh (1843–1885). (*EI*² s.v. *cf.* Holt 1958:90–92)

In Shī‘ī Islam the messianic expectations assumed an even more millennial character. In the year 1260 of the Hijrah (1844), one thousand years after the disappearance of the Hidden Imām, (260/873–74) these expectations seem to have reached an intensive phase, following which we witness the birth of two new religions: the Bābī and then the Bahā’ī Faiths.

On the other side of the ocean, in America, in a different world of thought, the messianic expectations of the eschatological Adventist movement of William Miller (1782–1849) coincided to the year with the beginning of the Bāb’s activity; and just about the same time the Mormon religion was born with the prophecy of Joseph Smith (1805–1844). One can go on with this amazing list adding the various Adventist movements, which followed upon the disappointment with Millerism; the birth of the Aḥmadiyyah religious movement in India; the

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unusual development of the HaBaD (Lubavitch) Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe (established by Shneur Zalman of Ladi, 1747–1812); and one cannot ignore the substantial, far-reaching intellectual contribution of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to the social and political thought and practice of the time and thereafter. Despite the fact that these two positioned themselves as far away as possible from religion, their secular materialism resulted in the strange naissance of movements that may aptly be defined as religions without a god.

The historian is justified in attributing to chance the fact that all these spiritual and intellectual developments happened in the nineteenth century, except, however, for the rise of the messianic expectations in the Shī‘ah, which coincided in this century with the millennium of the Twelfth Imām’s occultation. Granted that the “nineteenth century” as such is only a technical designation of time, we can still attempt to consider this period in light of the events that shaped it. There are clear momentous events, which define the beginning and the end of this period. The French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century with the upheavals of the Napoleonic experience marks the beginning, and the First World War indicates its end. Other historians might define the period by other dates, but one can hardly disregard the fact that Western civilization after 1789 began its march on a new path, just as it did in other momentous periods in history.

Croce’s Religion of Liberty

It was Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) who singled out this century as the one that gave birth to an idea, which he defined as no less than a religion. This was the “Religion of Liberty,” which emerged “when the Napoleonic adventure was at an end.” It was then, about two decades after the turn of the century, that “among all peoples hopes flared and demands were being made for independence and liberty.” These demands could not be suppressed. “They grew louder... the more they met repulse and repression.” Hopes sprang up in disappointment and defeat. (Croce 1934:3)

Examining the meaning of the concept “liberty,” Croce emphasizes that it had a long history and appeared on the historical scene in diverse circumstances and a variety of conditions, and after joining “fraternity” and “equality,” it set out to demolish the old order. However, in the nineteenth century it appeared alone “and men gave it their admiration as a star of incomparable splendour” (*Ibid.* 6). For Croce, the content of liberty belongs to the history of thought or the history of philosophy. It was not necessarily the object of professional philosophers, but was “on the lips of every one, appearing in the stanzas of poetry and in the words of men of action no less than in the formulas of those who were philosophers by profession” (*Ibid.* 9). Although the concept was not new, there was much novelty in the appearance of this concept in the nineteenth century:

Men had not attained that concept by chance or had not suddenly, reached the entrance to that road in one leap or one flight; they had been brought there by all the experiences and solutions of philosophy as it laboured for centuries, experiences and solutions that were always lessening the distance and calming the dissension between heaven and earth, God and the world, the ideal and the real. By giving ideality to reality and reality to ideality, philosophy had recognized and understood their indivisible unity, which is identity. (*ibid* 7)

This unity to the point of identity means that the history of thought or philosophy is history in general, no matter if we call it political, economic, or moral since these feed on philosophy and are fed by it. Philosophy, therefore, is not only that of great thinkers in the ancient times, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, such as Plato, Aristotle, Galileo, Descartes, and Kant, but it is also expressed through the major events that accompanied the crystallization of Western civilization. We can speak about the philosophy of the Greek world resisting the Barbarians, and of Rome in civilizing them.

We include the philosophy of the Christian redemption, that of the Church which fought against the Empire, that of the Italian and Flemish communes in the Middle Ages, and above all the Renaissance and the Reformation, which vindicated individuality once more in its double value for action and for morality. We mean the philosophy of the religious wars, that of the English Long Parliament, that of the liberty of conscience proclaimed by the religious sects of England and Holland and the American colonies, that of the declaration of the right of man made in these countries as well as the one to which the French revolution gave special efficacy. We include also the philosophy of technical discoveries, the revolutionary consequences of these discoveries in industry, and all the events and creations that helped to form that conception, and to put law and order into all things, and God back into the world. (*Ibid.* 8)

I brought these references to Croce's idealistic perspective of history in general, and that of the nineteenth century in particular, in order to point out an attitude that regards the said century as a historical landmark in which the long experience of the past expressed itself in the new concept of liberty, even the religion of liberty. It seemed to Croce that things were falling into place when great ideas shaped themselves into events and the long chain of events into ideas. Symbolically this amounted to the conscious placing of God into the world. This is the meaning of the notion that, far from being two realms of being, ideality and reality emerged as a unity, and that philosophy belonged to historical events as much as it belonged to pure thought. If new ideas are to be born, the century is prepared for them.

The religion of liberty surely has a place for other religions as well. Strangely enough, however, Europe did not particularly witness the birth of any clear-cut religious movement. These appear either across the ocean or beyond the deserts of Arabia. It is possible that Europe was too involved with the ideas of freedom and the intense political activity accompanying them

that it had no time for pure religious action outside the broad borders of the Christian heritage. Europe proper was too involved with its present to allow room for a new concept of eternity.

The Hasidic movement, though physically taking place in Europe, was an internal Jewish affair. It grew out of particular conditions pertaining only to Jewish history and representing a line of socio-historical development completely divorced from the general European atmosphere of the time. Yet, in spite of witnessing many conflicting spiritual trends and variety of ideas it contained the spirit of liberty in a very special way—the liberty to worship God unhampered by the bonds of the exclusiveness of institutionalized and socially sanctioned learning. (*cf.* Pieckarz 1997:37f; Etkes 2000:9ff.)

Modern Religious Activity: Similarity and Differences

Whether the nineteenth century religious and the intellectual surge, which happened in the East and West and in the New World, are truly accidental or the result of the “spirit of history” depends on the conviction of the historian. One thing is clear: there is no underlying connection between the spiritual developments in the East and those in Europe and America. One can find a causal connection between Millerism and the Adventist movements; but one can hardly find similar relation between the Mormon religion and Millerism. Even more pronounced is the completely independent character of the Hasidut, the Bābī and Bahā’ī Faiths, and other movements within Islam that were active during the century in various parts of the East.

One point should be made clear: some of these movements became new religions. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (incorrectly called the Mormon Church) and the Bahā’ī Faith are the most striking examples. Others, such as the Aḥmadiyyah, remained only partly within the grounds of the mother religion, while still others remained completely within the folds of their religious origins, such as the Wāḥḥābiyyah on the one hand, and the Hasidut on the other.

What is more interesting is that one encounters many points of similarity between most of the new religions and the religious movements despite the absence of any contact between their builders and active figures. For the sake of comparison let us consider the Mormons and the Bābī-Bahā’ī Faiths. The idea of revelation, prophecy, new Holy Writ revealed to the prophet-founder (even the usage of the term “plates” and “Tablets” for the revealed texts), the maintaining of the doctrine of God-given freedom of man, the absence of professional clergy, the emphasis on education and work, and the adherence to laws of health that prohibit the consumption of alcohol and drugs, (and in the case of the Mormons even tea or coffee) are some of the subjects in which one finds similarities between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints, and the Bābī religion, the furthest possible of all the new religions from each other both in their physical location and their origin.

Moreover, there is curious similarity in some details of their history too. Joseph Smith preceded the Bāb by only a few years, and like the Bāb he met violent death in the afternoon of June 27, 1844, at the hands of a rioting mob in the jail of Carthage. It was one month and five days after Sayyid ‘Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī announced himself as the Bāb. The Bāb himself was shot in the Jail of Tabrīz six years and eleven days later. The Mormon community suffered persecution, and was exiled from place to place in North America, always pushed *westward* until finally it settled at Utah under the leadership of Brigham Young. It was he who organized its institutions, and finally put it on the religious, social, and political map of America and the world.

The same can be said about the Bābī and later the Bahā’ī religions. They also sustained persecution and exile, as well as experienced the movement of the centres of the religion *westward* from the Iranian domains to the Ottoman Empire, and then to Europe and America. The consolidation of the religion not so much by the prophet-founder but rather by his successors is also a point of similarity. In the case of Bahā’u’llāh it was his son ‘Abbās Effendī (‘Abdu’l-Bahā’) and the later grandson Shawqī Effendī (Shoghi Effendi), who established the infrastructure of the Bahā’ī administration, and systematically brought to the world the voice of the new religion and its scriptures. In the case of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it was Brigham Young who led the movement in its crucial period of development as an independent religion.

The Common Heritage

Nevertheless, one would be justified in arguing that these are superficial similarities, even curiosities. However, with deeper inspection it becomes clear that there is nothing odd or incomprehensible in these similarities, suggested here only by way of illustration. They are deep-rooted in a common heritage, and in common cultural roots; they are the latest expression of philosophy sustained by a long chain of history. They are born out of the sum-total of the monotheistic culture resting far back on the heritage imparted by the Old Testament.

This heritage, though passing through many routes, unfolding its many appearances in diverse paths, rested on one sound foundation: the conviction beyond any shade of doubt in the existence of one God Omnipotent, Omniscient, the Architect of the world, and the Controller of its destiny. However, this divine being hiding in the mystery of Himself was also the major object of human curiosity inasmuch as He was the pivot of every aspect of human life. God became the object of the unending search, because as much as He was intellectually defined as the Ultimate Unknowable, God was at the same time described in every way that the human

mind could envisage, always in the image of humankind, always in human terms. In a word, through the monotheistic heritage which these religions share, either directly or indirectly, they recognize that God is nowhere yet everywhere; and that above all He is a personal god—the object of human love, attraction, hope and fear.

No matter how far these modern religions and religious movements are from one another, they all bear the same hereditary genes. Whether these genes came via the Christian path or via the Islamic path, they join, over the bridge of the millennia, one route, that of ancient Biblical monotheism. Looking into the dark depths of the well of history (to borrow the imagery of Thomas Mann), one may be able to detect the fading images of other routes of the monotheism of the great religions of Mesopotamia joining in to merge with the steady, assured, wide road of the Biblical religion. (Hämeen-Anttila 2001:48–49 following Simo Perpola. Details see bibliography, *ibid.* 66)

Even when the Holy Writ of a new religion is totally independent, conveying a perfectly new message as one encounters in the Book of Mormon or the Bāb's Bayān and Bahā'u'llāh's *Īqān, al-Kitāb al-Aqdas*, and other writings, the ancient Biblical spirit can be detected either directly or through the Qur'ānic tradition. Thus in the Book of Mormon one encounters the Biblical scenery and Biblical history immediately in the opening verses of the First Book of Nephi:

For it came to pass in the commencement of the year of the reign of Zedekiah King of Judah (my father, Lehi, having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days); and in that same year there came many prophets prophesying unto the people that they must repent or the great city of Jerusalem must be destroyed. (Nephi 1:4).

Here in the Book of Nephi as well as in the other writings in the Book of Mormon the reference to Biblical material is direct. But even if there is no such direct references to the Biblical text, the Biblical spirit is always present in the Writings even when they refer to events that were supposed to have taken place beyond the Ocean. Moreover, the Church and Christ are always present at the heart of the writings as well as at the basis of the new religion. Other Biblical figures inspire the writings on the one hand, and are incorporated into the new tapestry of the events reported by the Book of Mormon on the other.

Thus, for example, the story of Adam and Eve, and their fall resulting (according to the Christian doctrine) in the fall of all mankind, plays quite an important part in the Book of Alma (12:22); and his story is said to have been recorded in the Jeredite plates, which according to reports in the Book of Ether, Moroni refrained from mentioning, beginning his story from the time of the “great tower” (namely the Tower of Babel. (Gen. 11:7–9). Another Biblical figure is Joseph who is described as the one “who was carried captive into Egypt” and who was the object of the “covenants of the Lord” which were made unto him; this Joseph was also the forefather of

Lehi (2 Nephi 3:4), whose posterity are the remnants of Joseph's seed. Joseph's garment, which plays an important part in the Biblical and Qur'ānic story, is not overlooked in the Mormon tradition. "Behold (says Moroni), we are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; yea we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph, whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces, yea, and now behold, let us remember to keep the commandments of God, or our garments shall be rent by our brethren and we be cast into prison, or be sold, or be slain." (Alma 46:23). This is a clear example of the way in which Biblical features are not only mentioned as they are, but inspire new ideas and new interpretations. The Book of Mormon is full of such similar references to the Old and New Testament's people, places, prophecies, and events supporting the thesis of the Biblical spirit behind the new religion.

In the case of the Mormons, as well as in the case of the Adventist movements (though we speak about two different religious activities), the Biblical background is evident. After all they are the children of Christianity, reclining on the tradition of the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible, and nourishing on its redemptive Christology. In other words, the Biblical tradition reached all new religions and religious movements in the West directly, mainly through the scriptures and via the direct teachings and mission of the Church. No religious leader in the West, no prophet, no dreamer of instant redemption could think in other terms than those of the Bible. No new religious history could be envisaged outside the Biblical example, and no universal redemption could be thought of without Jesus of Nazareth. No Holy Land could be described without the example of The Holy Land, and no holy city without the image of Jerusalem.

In the case of the religions and religious movements, which were born in Islam, the source for their inspiration was naturally the Qur'ān and the Islamic tradition. In the case of Shī'ī Islam, where the most significant contribution was made to modern religious thought and practice, the tradition attributed to the Imāms should also be added.

The Qur'ānic and Classical Heritage

In order to avoid any misconception, I wish to be clear on this point. The Qur'ānic heritage does not represent direct Biblical influence, in spite of the fact that Biblical history and Biblical theology form the principal themes of the Holy Book of Islam. Scholarship since the time of the Jewish theologian Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) exhausted the subject of the similarities and differences between the Biblical text and the Qur'ānic text, and there can hardly be any question as to the common heritage underlying both similarities and differences. However, I have no doubt in my mind that these similarities and differences are not the outcome of the influence of the *Biblical text* on Muḥammad. Like many people in the Middle East, Muḥammad was exposed to Biblical as well as to extra-Biblical and ancient material, which were on the tongues of

travelers, story-tellers, and religious figures, members of various religious groups who shared their traditions with others. Otherwise, how can one explain the many differences in details between the Biblical text and the Qur'ānic text? How can one explain the existence of material, which is found in the Qur'ān as well as in the Midrash? One has to read *sūrah* 12 in the Qur'ān (*sūrat Yūsuf*) where the story of Joseph is told in great detail, and pay attention to the differences, and to the additions, which clearly indicate that the story came to Muḥammad from an independent source, or even from more than one source—a few story-tellers who had this fascinating story as part of their repertoire in the public performances. The Bible is surely there, for whomever is acquainted with the Biblical story. However, it is impossible to miss the added legends, which accumulated around it, as well as the omissions that change completely the nature of the human drama and its function. Whereas in the Bible the story of Joseph is a necessary link in the chain of the divine covenantal plan, the Qur'ānic report, concentrating on the personal fate of the hero, detached from the idea of God's Covenant with Joseph's ancestors, serves the purpose of emphasizing the universal principle of divine justice. The same can be said about almost every Biblical story that appears in the Qur'ān. The underlying common Biblical heritage is present, but it is filtered through independent oral devices.

The Biblical heritage was an important common ground in modern religions and religious movements, but there is another heritage that constitutes another side of this common ground. This is the Greek heritage—especially classical (mainly Greek) philosophy. Side by side with Christianity, the classical Greco-Roman world forms the sound foundation of Western civilization. Greek philosophy is also the origin for the methods and contents of the philosophical thought and theological investigation in Islam and Judaism. The fact that Greek philosophy was regarded as a legitimate, and even superior, source of knowledge for investigating the meaning of the religious source of knowledge in Islam as well as in Judaism, and the fact that the products of this investigation found their way back to the west, created a situation whereby the gap between east and west, was narrowed and the common basis for religious interaction—consciously or not—widened. Muslim and Jewish philosophers, scholastics and theologians, men of logic and mystics alike, shared the same Greek sources to ask questions about God, creation, the destiny of man and the nature of salvation, just as their colleagues in the west did, from the Middle Ages right through until modern times. This is the reason that Muslim theologians and philosophers were easily understood, studied, and interpreted by western thinkers. This is also the source for the rather easy acceptance of the Bahā'ī religion in the west, in spite of the fact that it originated in Shī'ite Islam. The *mélange* of the Qur'ānic and Biblical heritage, Christian eschatology, and Greek-Islamic philosophical thought, cloaked in the English language by Shoghī Effendi, proved very palatable to westerners.

The Bābī and the Bahā'ī Faiths, although representing the activity of two religious leaders, regarded by their adherents as prophets and manifestations of God, are by nature very similar.

For the Bahā'īs the Bāb was Bahā'u'llāh's herald, who prophesied the coming of "Him whom God Shall Make Manifest." For the Bābīs the Bāb was the one and only Prophet of the Age, the Point, the Centre of Creation and its source. For the Bahā'īs he was only the *First Point* (*nuqtah-i-ūlā*), inferior to Bahā'u'llāh who was the true reason for his (the Bāb's) mission. This historical-theological controversy is highly important in Bābī and Bahā'ī debate. It has caused dissent and ill-feelings, attracted emotional reactions, and marred in one way or the other the early history of the faiths, and it is still alive as a controversial topic among Bahā'ī, and non-Bahā'ī, scholars. This controversy, however, bears no influence on the point which I have been developing, namely that no matter which new religion, religious movement or school, or religious thought we consider, whether in the East or in the West, they share the same tradition. The Bāb and Bahā'u'llāh are both the products of the monotheistic tradition of Islam. They grew out of the Qur'ānic world, and they both speak the language that belongs to the monotheistic civilization that developed around the Islamic tradition. Indirectly they too are the product of the ancient Biblical world of ideas.

In other words, if an imaginary meeting could be arranged say between the Bāb, Bahā'u'llāh, Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad Qādyānī, William Miller, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Rabbi Israel Ba'al-Shem-Tov, and Ellen G. White, to mention only a few of the major figures which in the time under discussion created, or deeply influenced, the religious activity among Jews, Christians and Muslims, they would have had no problem to conduct meaningful discussion with each other. They share the same vocabulary and the same world of concepts regarding all the main aspects of the religious phenomenon. They would have no problem understanding each other when talking about God, creation, revelation and prophecy; about holy writ, about redemption and messianism, about divine reward and punishment; and so on. They would not differ from their medieval predecessors—Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars—who disagreed on major issues concerning the religions of each other, but had no problems fighting the battles of their disagreements with identical weapons, and engaging in constructive discussions of religious issues, because they shared the same lexicon and could form their ideas within the same conceptual framework. Sharing vocabulary and world of concepts does not mean agreement. On the contrary, the similarity of vocabulary and the usage of the same family of concepts enabled the thinkers, theologians, philosophers, and mystics to define their differences in a meaningful way.

God and the Universe

I mentioned above the monotheistic and Biblical heritage, which was the source, shared by the major religious movements in the nineteenth century, but as I have just mentioned, there is more than the Biblical heritage. Throughout the ages, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were

constantly enriched by intellectual activity, and attempted to understand the relation between the divine being and the universe using methods of argumentation which lay outside the immediate Biblical world of ideas. They searched for a satisfactory solution to the seeming contradiction between the philosophical concept of the unattainable, unperceivable, inconceivable god, hiding in the mystery of his absence, and the teachings of the scriptures of all three monotheistic religions that spoke about revelation and prophecy, personal divine attention, divine law, divine reward and punishment, and religious practice (that is to say the *ritual*) based on the direct interaction between the believer and God. In other words, the believer prays, and God “hears,” and may change His Mind, so to speak, depending on the source and the potency of the prayer. As one Jewish teaching declares: (God says): “I issue a decree and the righteous (*tzadīq*) rules it out;” (*BT, Mo‘ed Qatān*, 16b) or: “The righteous (*tzadīqīm*) decree and God fulfils their words.” (*MR, Numbers (Bamidbār)* section 14 para. 4)

To this, one should add the concept of the revealed God, which forms the heart of all three religions, and the basically pantheistic notion of the immanent divine presence. As mentioned above, the relation between God and the universe has always been a source for the speculation of philosophers and theologians, as well as for the inspired messages of prophets. In one way or another, an answer was necessary to account both for the existence of reality, and for its rectification. More precisely, a meaningful and satisfactory answer had to be offered for creation and redemption. In spite of deep differences in essence, the answers given by all the religions were somewhat similar. For both creation and redemption there was a need for the revealed side of the Divine Being.

To be sure, for the believers, who are not bothered by the philosophical debates about the nature of God, these questions are immaterial. For them the scriptures give clear answers to both creation and redemption, as well as to the relations with God, by defining what pleases Him, and what causes His wrath and punishment. In spite of His omnipotence, the scriptures of all the monotheistic religions insist on His proximity and availability without questioning how this is possible. For the Psalmist:

The Lord is nigh unto all that call upon him, to all that call upon him in Truth.
(Ps.145:18).

Muhammad emphasizes that Allah says:

We created man, and We know what his soul whispers within him, for We are nearer to him than his jugular vein. (Q, 50:16. Bell’s Translation)

The method of communication between God and His creation, more particularly with humans, is also well defined: God reveals Himself to man either directly, as He did on Mount Sinai to the people of Israel, or via His chosen messengers, the prophets. Christianity, which emphasizes the idea of divine love as the most characteristic feature of the relations between God

and man, has God revealing Himself in history in the double function of the leader of humanity and its saviour. Christianity thus carries the idea of the divine revelation to maximum length by actually placing God physically into human history.

But this simple, and admittedly, workable, system of relations between God and man represented by the scriptures, and applied by ritual, caused major problems for the more sophisticated thinkers. Aristotelian philosophy, regarded sometimes as valid as the scriptures themselves, could not accept creation out of nothing, and had no place for involvement of “Pure Thought,” the “Unmoved Prime Mover,” in the affairs of the measurable reality. Regarding the problems from the moral point of view it seemed impossible to involve the pure divine entity, the ideal good, with the creation of crude matter—the source of evil.

The Mystery of the Nature of the Divine

Without going into detail about the various systems of thought, which applied themselves to the problem, it is safe to say that they all tried to find ways of understanding revelation, and the nature of God. At the same time they searched for a proper definition and theories of reality, naturally re-interpreting the scriptures in such a way that would support such definitions and theories. Here the diversity between the religions became obvious, and the route was opened for new, varied, and sometimes bold religious creations, and for the appearance of new religions and religious movements.

The combination of the intellectual investigation of the nature of the divine, and the redemptive, or messianic, expectations is the most powerful combination in this development. It should be added that this is an ancient combination which found expression in Gnosticism, and appeared later in various forms in Jewish and Islamic mysticism, and in all the modern religions and religious movements.

The Jewish Qabbalah (Kabbalah, Cabbalah) is probably the boldest representative of the mystical answer to the problem of the divine revelation and the process of the perpetual redemption of the world, or its constant “repair.” The divine being, the essence of God, remains hidden in the Mystery of His eternal Self, but there is another side of God, the revealed and active God. This is a complicated combination, an intricate structure of active parts working in harmony, paired into male and female sides, and busy affecting the perpetual act of creation that never stops. Man is party to this mysterious and fascinating system of the revealed God. Man is not only the object of the divine grace flowing through the tree of the *sephirot*, namely the representation of the revealed divinity, but he is also the partner of God in the perpetual act of redemption. Through his actions in the world of reality, man can create the conditions for a successful and fruitful union on high of the two sides of the revealed God. This union is usually defined as the union between “The Holy Blessed Be He” and His Presence (the *Shekhinah*).

Man's prayer and other ritual activities, if done in a proper way with the right intention and correct method, are no less than tools to assist with the successful impregnation of the revealed divine powers of bearing, or in a bolder language, to assist with the successful unification of the *sephiroth*, and returning the divine entity to its original integrity. (Idel. 1993:71ff; Scholem 1993:173ff; Tishby (1) 1971:98ff; 131ff.)

In this way the Qabbalah, whose sources are found in the oldest Jewish texts, crystallized in a very clear way the idea of the existence of a revealed divine world, or layer of existence, between created world and the eternal realm of the unattainable divine essence, the "*ein sof*" (literally "The Endless"). The Qabbalah thus offered an answer to both the creation, and the perpetual involvement of God in its continual existence and renovation. But more than that, the Qabbalah offered a purpose for the creation of man and his existence, and made him full partner of God in the eternal process of creation.

It also put prophecy and godliness into place in this system. Prophets and men of God were fully incorporated into the system as integral and necessary parts of it. They became the channels of grace, that is to say, the pipeline for the flow of the divine seed to the world, the chariot that carries the revealed divine presence. The man of God, the righteous or the *Tzadīq*, is necessary for the proper action of the complicated combination of all the parts of the divine being or the *sephiroth*. Thus it is understandable why he should be regarded as the "foundation of the world"—*tzadīq yesod 'olām*. In Hasidic thought as well as in Qabbalah he is also needed to show the way of the correct worship of God in order to save the sparkles (*nitzotzōt*) of the divine light and return them to their "lofty source." (Scholem 1973:213ff.)

I mention the Qabbalah, because in its elaborate system of the revealed god we have two elements, which we see in religious thought in the east, resulting in the Bābī and Bahā'ī religions. The two elements are the existence of an intermediate world between the divine essence and the physical world, where the divine creative powers are active, and the presence of a figure in a human form that serves as a channel of grace connecting the divine domain and the realm of physical existence.

In Christianity, Jesus being the Son in the mystery of the Trinity represents the creative power of God, occupying alone the intermediate station between Father and creation, and at the same time embodies the divine love, and thus fulfills also the function of the channel for the divine grace.

The Adventist movements, especially the Seventh-Day Adventists, emphasized the divine side of Christ and his creative power. At the same time Jesus' messianic function, to be revealed in his Second and final advent, was also emphasized. The combination of the two would result in the establishment of the Divine Kingdom in the world of creation. In other words, the revealed side of the divine entity, represented in Jesus, being the manifestation and incarnation of God,

having once entered into history for a limited period of three and a half years, will be repeated successfully and universally forever. Meanwhile, Jesus serves as the High Priest in the heavenly Temple as a final stage before his final messianic function. This heavenly temple is to my mind just another, probably less defined, representation of the “intermediate” world which we find very developed in the writings of the Shaykhīs, the Bāb and Bahā’u’llāh.

Revealed God and Perfect Man

Without much difficulty we can see that all three religions and their modern offshoots developed the idea of the intermediate realm of the divine entity, which represents the revealed side of God, and the idea of the perfect man, (or woman as in the case of the Adventists)—the manifestation of God, the Prophet, the Messenger, the *Tzadīq*, or similar appellations—who serve as a channel of grace between the spiritual realm and the physical one. The term “the Perfect Man” *al-insān al-kāmil* is central in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s (1165–1240) mystical thought which influenced all later thinkers who used this and similar terms. “The perfect man as the image of God and the archetype of nature, is at once the mediator of divine grace and the cosmic principles by which the world is animated and sustained.” (Nicholson in *The Legacy of Islam*.1931:225) This definition is good for the *Tzadīq* in Hasidut, for the Manifestation of God in the Bābī-Bahā’ī faiths, and it can pass also as the definition of Jesus, the Christ, the Saviour, the High Priest in the Heavenly Sanctuary (*Seven-Day Adventists Believe*. . . . 1988:313–315)

This is not an attempt to avoid the deep and fundamental differences between religions. On the contrary, the difference in details are many and acute, but in principal we encounter here the same elements present in the ideal structure of existence. It is always three layers, which seems to be the best answer for the relation between the totally Unknown and the completely sensed.

I refrained from mentioning the Christian Qabbalah, where the similarities are even greater, because Christian Qabbalah (Scholem 1993:62; Idel 1993:267f; Tishby (1)1971:47ff.) played, as far as I know, almost no part in the development of the Adventist movements. On the other hand, the Jewish Qabbalah had much to do with the development of the Hasidic Movement, which, in addition to its crucial social impact, popularized in a way many Cabbalistic ideas. As the Hasidut emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, from its early and crude form, two fundamental features appeared in it. The first was that the divine essence is unattainable, unreachable and beyond the grasp of the human mind. Man was nothing but “dust and ash” before Him, and man’s thought could never reach this hidden mystery of God. Only through the keeping of the divine commandments (*mitzvōt*) is it possible to reach the various kinds of holiness. In other words, the divine commands are an aspect of the revealed God, the only possible way for man to arise from his insignificance (Piekarz 1997:60–61, and quotation there). The second was that the attributes of God, His Names, the revealed part of His Being, which produced creation and made

itself known to the prophets, can be grasped and attained. The *Tzadīq*, the Hasidic Rabbi, is the chosen perfect man, and he is capable not only to be the channel to this realm of the revealed Divine Names, but he is also capable, if need be, to make use of them. (See below)

The secrets of the divine creative power are found in the scriptures. The words of the *Torah* have an external side—*nigleh*—and a hidden side—*nistar*. It is in the alphabet that the real divine power is hiding. The *Tzadīq* has the knowledge to decipher the code, which holds the secrets of the Holy Writ. The Torah is regarded a blueprint for creation, and therefore it existed before creation. The divine architect, so to speak, observed the Torah and created the world. The *Tzadīq*, therefore, can tap the creative powers of the words of the Torah of the Tetragrammaton of the name of God and even of each letter of the alphabet. If he wants he can use them to influence creation and even engage in a new creation including the creation of man emulating the divine action (Idel, 1996 *passim*). It is important to remember the remark of one of the most famous Hasidic Rabbis in the 19th century, Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin, (Friedmann 1796–1850) who said:

The whole *Torah* is (concentrated) in the Book of Genesis (*Bereshīt*) and the Book of Genesis in its first verse, and the first verse in the first word of Genesis—“*bereshīt*,” (“In the beginning”) and the word “*bereshīt*” is concentrated in the first letter “*beth*” (ב) and the letter “*beth*” is concentrated in the point inside this letter—and I am this point, because the *Tzadīk* is the point of the Torah.” (Assaf, 1997:346.)

The saying is attributed to R. Israel Ba‘al Shem Tov (known by his acronym The Besht) the founder of the Hasidut. (See note tracing the saying to *Keter Shem Tov*, Brooklyn 1987:18-45 – a collection of sayings attributed to the Besht).

Incidentally, R. Isarel of Ruzhin, died in the same year as the Bāb, who, as we shall soon see, spoke about the same concept almost in the same words—naturally referring to the Qur’ān. R. Israel’s observation is connected not only with searching the words of the scriptures for the secrets of God and creation, but also with the attitude to the *Tzadīk*, and the meaning or nature of his existence. As it is represented here, the *Tzadīk* does not belong to the usual order of creation. In form he is human, but he is not a creature belonging to the hierarchical order of the physical reality existing in the organisms of the created world (living, vegetative or mineral). He is, in other words, a particular manifestation of the divine will to serve (among other functions) as a channel of divine grace. (Piekarz 1997:44–47)

The searching of the scriptures for hidden meaning, which is regarded to be the true meaning, exists in Judaism from ancient times. The *Midrash*, namely the field of Jewish Rabbinic literature, which developed the reading of the hidden meaning behind the text, had many aims: judicial, moral, educational, political, and mystical. The Qabbalah carried the mystical reading of the scriptures to great lengths, and the Hasidut, in general, followed suit,

developing the search of scriptures for mystical meaning, as well as studying them in the traditional way. (*cf.* Scholem 1993:36–85)

However, side by side with the strong Cabbalistic element in the Hasidic thinking, the prevailing idea in it is that of the divine immanence. This was the basic concept taught by the Hasidic leaders: God is found in everything; God is in every deed and in every thought. In other words, the Hasidūt, by emphasizing the idea of divine immanence, revolutionized the whole concept of the divine presence, causing the irrelevance of the Cabbalistic hierarchy represented by the “tree of the *sephirot*,” the emanations of the revealed god. (R. Elior quoted by Etkes 2000:146).

What are, therefore, the relations between the two representations of God—the immanent one and the transcendental one, which necessitates the dualistic representation by the introduction of the revealed god in a system of emanations? The answer, which the Hasidut gave, was that God is present and there is no need for the angels to deliver man’s supplications to him from “one shrine to the other.” God, however, created the *impression* that such a process of deliverance of prayers through a hierarchical ladder was necessary to teach man that he has to make an effort to come nearer to God. (*Ibid.* 147 quoting *Keter Shem Tov*, 30:5(b)). The idea of divine immanence can create the mistaken notion that the attainment of God is simple or easily achieved, that the “clinging” to God is within reach, without effort. For this reason the Besht, the creator of the Hasidut, emphasized the need for great spiritual investment to achieve the mystical experience of the attachment to God (*debeqūt*) (*Ibid.* 146; *cf.* Idel 1993:67ff.). Moreover, the divine commands and precepts are not regarded only as the landmarks or the beacons enabling the individual to free himself from this “world of lies,” and reach the presence of God. The divine command as it is crystallized in the normative precepts (*mitzvōt*) is seen as the vital divine power, which sustains all existence. The “command” is thus identical with “vitality” from which flows the divine grace to preserve all the worlds. The debate between the earlier teachers of the Hasidut and some of the later ones was whether the individual should feel enjoyment while keeping God’s commands, or whether his enjoyment is a sign of weakness because this means that he remains attached to feelings pertaining to this world. Now, since this is a “world of lies,” it follows that by the mere enjoyment of keeping the divine commands, this devotion is not free from the vanity of the world and its falsity. Among the later Hasidic leaders the predominant view was that nothing belonging to this world should come between the true seeker of *debeqūt*, attachment to God, and the keeping of the commands, which help him attain to this attachment. (Piekarcz 1997:54ff.)

Detachment

This internal tension between the two views of the Divine Presence in the Hasidut is found in the Bahā’ī writings as well, to which I shall come later. Side by side with the idea that the

Divine essence is unreachable and inconceivable, we find the idea that man must clear his mind, and detach himself from all that is in this world in preparation for attaining the true knowledge of God and becoming the pure vessel for the eternal mystical divine effulgence. (*mahall-i zuhurāt-i-fuyūdāt-i-ghayb nāmutanāhī*. Bahā'u'llāh, *Iqān*, 1998:1–2).

Bahā'u'llāh never heard about the Hasidut, nor has any Hasidic thinker ever heard about Bahā'u'llāh, yet one is amazed to find so many similar ideas in the writings of the two movements. The Hasidut preceded the advent of the Bāb by some 80 years, but in this case chronological facts mean nothing. These similar ideas, which should be the subject for further, detailed investigation, represent independent spiritual life in two remote corners of the earth. But are they really so far away? If we continue the line of thought which I have been trying to develop, it is not difficult to detect the ancient monotheistic heritage tested against Greek philosophy of the Middle Ages, in all three religions, particularly in Judaism and in Islam. It is not difficult to see the residues of the various sides of *sūfī* mystical thought in Islam and Judaism growing independently but also influencing each other and finding a natural vent in the later developments of both religions.

In an interim summary way, it is possible to conclude that two major sources of heritage form in part the common background for the new religions and religious movements: the monotheistic Biblical source and the meeting with Greek philosophy. The reaction to the latter and the need to find solutions to the theological problems that it posed resulted in perpetual activity and productivity directly connected with these problems. Even when the issue of the relations between philosophy and the evidence of the scriptures was long forgotten, the search after a proper understanding of the mystery of God continued under the already imbedded influence of this old clash of two sources of knowledge.

Hidden Meaning and Magic

We mentioned the fact that allegorical interpretation of the scriptures was one of the ways by which the scriptural text was given new life. The hidden meanings that could be found behind the straightforward text of the Biblical and Qur'ānic verses were endless. Here again we find a similarity in the attitude to the scriptures in all three religions. This is not new and not typical to the modern religious developments. On the contrary, homiletic and allegorical interpretation of the scriptural texts is abundant in Judaism, Christianity and Islam from the early stages of the development of the exegetical literature.

The hidden meanings of the texts involved not only the *contents* but also the *form*. The letters of the scriptures acquired a life of their own: their form and the numerical values were searched for meaning. Letters were seen as living bodies and sometimes as the building blocks in

the act of creation. (Idel 1996:53;205f) Gematria, the science of numerical values of letters used in the field of theology and mysticism, was employed in the process of the esoteric interpretation of the scriptural texts too. (See Buzaglo, below pp. 447-461). On the one hand this method of studying the texts represented a genuine attempt to uncover the mystical messages hiding in them; but on the other hand it developed into magic. (See Buzaglo below pp. 447f.) The usage of holy texts for magical purposes, which we find in all religions, exists long before modern times. (Idel 1993:128ff; Būnī, 1985:3ff; Ibn al-Ḥājj (4) 1972:129ff; ad-Damīnī 1993 *passim* on magical usages of Qur’ānic verses)

In spite of the differences between the magical materials in the three religions they all shared the idea of the presence of demonic powers in the world. These demonic powers constitute constant dangers to the health of body and mind. All three religions shared the anxiety of these dangers, and the need for protection against them. Demonic powers, like any other powerful element, could also be harnessed and used in the service of humans, if the appropriate tools—correct spells and formulae of incantations—for harnessing them could be found. The holy texts were searched for such tools both for defense against the harm of demons, and for their positive employment. In Islam the usage of special texts for magical purpose is found already in the Qur’ān. The Prophet was very apprehensive of the presence of demons and of their danger. He was particularly obsessed with the powerful Satan (*shayṭān*) whose aim is to lead man astray from the path of God. It is not surprising, therefore, to find in the Qur’ān magical verses dedicated to fighting away the demons, and their supreme Head. The words employed in these verses sound like a spell. Some have an onomatopoeic sound, which gives the impression that they were chosen to be read with a loud voice in the process of combating the devil. Here is an example of such a spell:

1. Say! I take refuge with the Lord of the people (*bi-rabb an-nās*)
2. The King of the people,
3. The God of the people.
4. From the evil of the whispering, the lurking.
5. Which whispers in the breasts of the people.
6. Of Jinn and men.

In Arabic the prevalent sound of the text is the hissing sound of the letters “s” and “sh” (*sīn* and *shīn*). When reciting these verses loudly, it is impossible to miss their incantation nature. The same type of text, representing similar magical function, is Sūrah 113.

1. Say I take refuge with the Lord of daybreak
2. From the evil of what He hath created,

3. And from the evil of the darkening when it comes on
4. And from the evil of the blowers among knots
5. And from the evil of an envious one when he envies.

Here again the prevailing sound is similar to Sūrah 114, and the magical protective incantation is also very clear. These two sūrahs, which close the Qur’ān, are called by all Muslim scholars *al-mu’awwidhatān* the two “protective” (sūrahs), and the commentators make it clear that they were both recited as a protection against evil spirit and evil doers, including counteracting witchcraft such as the one mentioned here, produced by witches who cast their spell by blowing over knots (probably of a rope on a branch or a piece of wood). It seems that because of their clear magical nature some of the early collectors and readers of the Qur’ānic text refused to include them in their text of the Qur’ān. (Ibn Kathīr *Tafsīr* (4), 1987: 610ff.)

However, the two last sūrahs are not the only Qur’ānic texts, which have a magical nature, and were intended for magical purposes. Sūrah 2 verse 255, known as the “Verse of the Throne,” is not only revered as one of the most important sūrahs of the Qur’ān but also as possessing magical qualities. *Shams al-Ma’ārif al-Kubrā*, the famous book of magic and related subjects, by Ahmad b. ‘Alī al-Būnī (d. 622/1225), speaks in great detail about the magical qualities of this verse and gives instruction on how to use it in an amulet, and when is the best time to wear this amulet to achieve the maximum benefit from it.

And you should know that this noble verse possesses a wonderful meaning and unusual secret for the preservation of wealth and the children and the wives... and for the attraction of the customer and the prosperity to the shop, and for (easing the condition) of the madman and the insane (or epileptic), and the mentally disturbed. It (the verse) should be written on paper and hung on him (whom is in need for such an amulet). (Būnī 1985:114-116. Quotation from p.116)

It is instructive that in a modern book about magic (*sihr*) a contemporary Muslim scholar maintains seriously that these verses, when used properly, are sure protection against the evil effects of magic. (Damīnī, 1993:63f)

Names of God and Magic

The names of God play naturally the most important part in the magic practice, and their usage necessitated knowledge and expertise. The names of God were not only regarded to be the representation of the revealed God, but also the creative powers of God. As such, if used properly, they could bring great benefit, and cause, at the same time, much harm depending on the purpose of their usage. *Shams al-Ma’ārif al-Kubrā* is full of instructions for the treatment of divine names (e.g. *ult. loc. cit.*). In addition many *ḥadīths*, instructing magical pursuit and

magical practice, using the divine names, and verses of the Qur’ān, were collected and put into circulation. These *hadīths* and magical instructions have always been highly popular, and to this day they are published in booklets for common use. One of these favorite booklets is *ad-Du‘ā’ al-Mustajāb min al-Ḥadīth wa-al-Kitāb* compiled by Ahmad ‘Abd al-Jawād and ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (published in Medinah n.d.). Another work is (quoted above) a small book by Dr. Musfir ad-Damīnī, Professor in the department of the *sunnah* at the University of Riyād, who collected and classified the material from the Qur’ān and the *sunnah* in order to prove the truth of magic, and the ways to treat it. This book was published in Riyād in 1993.

The magical power of letters, numbers and divine names is common in mystical literature in Judaism and Christianity as well as in Islam. In Judaism it is very ancient and it has continued down to present time. From Cabbalistic and pre-Cabbalistic sources it flows into the modern movement of the *Ḥasidut*. The popular appellation *Ba‘al Shem*—he who possesses the Name—reflects one side of this magical practice, which could be carried as far as actually participating in an act of creation. The proper knowledge of the true secrets of the divine names meant acquirement of the same creative power of God Himself, the creative power imbued in these divine names. It should be emphasized, however, that in Jewish mysticism it is mainly the proper name of God, which Jews are not allowed to pronounce, the *Tetragrammaton* that has this power. The conviction that the *Tetragrammaton* is a very powerful name of God was so dominant that we find already in *Tannaic* literature the emphatic declaration that whoever uses the “Explicit Name” (*shem ha-meforāsh*) has no share in the world to come. Such a warning was needed because the usage of the *Tetragrammaton* was, no doubt, used for magical purposes since ancient times. (*Sepher Taghīn*, Hebrew Introduction 1866:30ff) The power of the “Explicit Name” does not diminish the fact that all the 22 letters of the alphabet possess magical and mystical powers and their proper knowledge opens the gates to the secrets of creation. For after all, the Torah was written with these 22 letters “that are engraved in a pen of fire on the terrifying and awesome crown of the Holy Blessed be He.” (*Otiyyôt derabbī ‘Aqībah* vol.1, quoted in *ibid.* 28) Naturally from these 22 letters of the alphabet all the other names of God were composed (*Ibid.* 29; cf. Scholem, 1993:164f.; Idel, *Golem*, 1996, 37ff. and *passim* Liebes 2000:67ff; Etkes, 2000:15ff. For Christianity see Dornseiff 1925 *passim*, and for the Christian mystical attitude to the Hebrew alphabet see Lipiner 1989:43 n.49).

Before the creation of the world, *The Book of Splendour* (the *Zohar*) says, God amused Himself with the 22 letters of the alphabet, and therefore the secrets of creation are in these letters (Nahmanides—Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (Acronym: RaMBaN) in the introduction to his commentary to the Book of Genesis. Lipiner 1989:57). All the Jewish mystical sources repeat various versions of this idea, which is found in a different version in the Talmudic Legend, which says that when Moses went up to heaven he met God who was decorating the letters with “crowns” (*BT Shabbat*, 89a. *Sepher Taghin. Liber Coronularum*, Latin introduction 1866:vii). In

a less anthropomorphic way, the relation between creation and the letters can be presented as the eternal movements of the metaphysical light of the *ein sof* (“endless”), for the purpose of building worlds, that assume the geometrical forms of the letters of the alphabet (Lipiner 1989:3–9). The mystics clarified that although we know letters in their physical forms, arranged into words, they have a high source, and therefore they have also the magic nature that enables them to ascend to their metaphysical source (*Ibid.* 26). It is worth mentioning that the Babylonian Talmud, reflecting an old tradition, recognized the ritualistic sacredness of letters (*BT, Shabbat*, 116a).

Of all the combination of letters those representing the divine attributes are the most important, and among these divine attributes the most important is the attribute of One (*ehād*)—the heart of Jewish monotheism, reiterated morning and evening in the most important declaration incumbent upon every Jew “Hear O Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is One.” This sublime unequivocal declaration of the Divine unity centres on the word *ehād*—One, which naturally became the symbol of the true Jewish devotion to God, and an unequivocal requirement for faithfulness to him. In Qabbalah and Hasidut, the attribute of One has many applications. The most important is probably the one which emphasizes the need to cause the institution of the active unity of God, and the so-called “repair” (*tiqqūn*) of the Divine Name through religious practice—mainly prayer. (Scholem 1993:120ff.) This is “the secret of unification,” (*sod ha-Yihūd*) which is, therefore, the main purpose of the mystical devotion. In the actual act when performed with undivided intention (*kavvanah*) man takes an active part in the “renewal” of the unity of the divine powers. The “secret of unity” has two sides: “the establishment of the harmonious in the structure of the *sephirot* (divine emanations) and the unification of the source of emanation, namely returning the *sephirot* to their divine source.” (Tishby (1) 1971:105)

It is interesting that the same attitude to the letters of the alphabet as the building block of existence is found in the works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsāʾī. For him too, the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet, being divine Names and Attributes (composed of these letters), govern each thing in the world. They have the power to bestow meaningfulness upon the world “and therefore Being.” (Cole 1994:5ff.)

Names and Letters—The Bāb

We hear the same language, and encounter similar ideas, in the works of the Bāb. ‘Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī, the Bāb (1819–1850), was well aware of the mystical meaning and the magical power of letters, their numerical equivalencies, and of the names of God. (MacEoin 1994:14ff.) An important part of his work is dedicated to the investigation of the mystical meanings in the Qur’ān. He was fascinated by the idea, which was by his time common knowledge, in Shīʿite as well as non-Shīʿite circles, about the creative power of the names of

God, the ninety-nine “Beautiful Names.” He knew very well that the *Imāms* were identical with these names, being themselves the tools of creation as well as the cause for creation. But most of all he was fascinated with the connection between the word *One* (*Wāhid*) representing the Divine absolute unity and the word Living (*ḥayy*) which represents the supreme quality of the Divine Being, Divine Existence and Divine Presence. The numerical value of *Wāhid* (One) is nineteen, that is to say the number eighteen, being the numerical value of *ḥayy* (Living), to which one must be added since oneness is always present in all the letters. Practically and symbolically he pictures the mystical union between the Living and His Oneness as a Holy completion and Divine perfection: the establishment of the secret of the ultimate One. The symbol of this union also placed him, as the Manifestation of God, as the supreme point in the centre of this union, as the cause of this mysterious, yet clear completeness. The mystery was cast in the form of letters, and the letters were chosen individuals—the first disciples, the first believers, who like planets revolved around the one sun of unity, the Bāb himself, the one who gives them life, the one who through his light, and life-giving energy, they exist. Thus he created a living system, in which the multiplicity was only the apparent manifestation of the union: the eighteen, which together with the Manifestation of God become the One (*wāhid*), the powerful number of the nineteen.

This mystical One has long been identified in the first verse of the Qur’ān, this otherwise simple and clear invocation: “In the Name of Allah the Compassionate the Merciful.” Overtly the verse contains the proper name of God (Allah) with two of His Attributes the synonyms: “Compassionate,” and “Merciful;” but already Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā’ī (1753–1826), and probably others before him paid careful attention to the fact that this innocent verse is composed of four words and that the number of the letters of “*bism allāh ar-rahmān ar-rahīm*” is nineteen in all. The fact that the *Basmalah* is composed of four words is also very significant. The Muslim scholars taught that the number four is the foundation of the divine order. The first four numbers (1–4) are the source of all the existing numbers. Four is the number of the elements, the substances, the natural condition, the humours, the seasons of the year, and the points of the compass. (*Rasā’il* 1928 (1):23-28.) It is difficult avoiding the facts, which call for attention, that as much as the Jewish mystics emphasized the four letter Divine Name (the *Tetragrammaton*), also the eyes of the Muslim mystics were attracted to the number four as the Divine number. The latter did not regard it coincidental that the Divine name, *Allāh*, is composed of four letters (very similar to the *Tetragrammaton*) nor that Muḥammad’s name, and Ḥusayn’s name (for the Shī’ites) is also composed of four letters. The Bāb’s name Muḥammad and Bahā’u’llāh’s name Ḥusayn fall, of course, into this category. There is hardly any question that ‘Abbās Effendī (‘Abdu ’l-Bahā’)’s explanation of the meaning of the “Greatest Name” draws on the tradition about the mystical power of the number four, along the thinking of the Ismā’īliyyah. Referring to the “Greatest name” that is engraved on the ring stone on which the letter *hā* appears four times on the four corners of the design, he says: “As for the four *hā*’s these are the pillars of the

Temple of Unity and together add *up to ten* (italics added), for one and two make three and three six, six and four ten...” (MacEoin 1994:143)

There is nothing incidental in mystical thought. The nineteen letters of the first verse of the Qur’ān, and of every *sūrah* of the Qur’ān, could just not be ignored. They represented no less than the supreme unity of the divine being, and as such, the essence of the creative power of God, especially since in addition to consisting of nineteen letters the *Basmalah* begins with the letter *bā’*, incidentally, just as the *Torah* begins with the letter *beth*.

The Letter Bā’

The letter *bā’* is not just a simple letter; it has qualities which are connected with its position in the order of both the Hebrew and Arabic alphabet, and with its orthographic shape, namely, the way in which it is written. In the order of the Arabic as well as Hebrew, Greek and Latin alphabets, the *bā’*, (or *beth*, *betta*, *B*) comes after the *alef*, that has the numerical value of One. That is to say the *bā’* represents the first existence after the One, the divine entity or, undivided essence which is beyond comprehension. In other words, the *bā’* is the *revealed* side of the unknown *alef*. Therefore, the *bā’* is nothing less than the representation of the manifestation of God, the prophet, who embodies the creative power of the divine Word. It should be made clear that in all mystical systems the letters are not symbols but actually the building blocks used by God to create the universe. It thus follows that, the world was created in *bā’*, or with a *bā’*, which is good reason for the Qur’ān (and the Torah, a fact which the Bāb did not know) beginning with this letter. For this reason the greatest Name of God *Bahā’*, Splendour, begins with the letter *bā’* which in the Bahā’ī Faith became the identifying letter and the divine symbol of all worlds of existence—the divine realm, the world of physical reality and the realm of the Manifestation of God. The latter is the Middle world of the divine names, the abode of the Imāms, and the prophets, the kingdom of the divine creative Word or Order. (One should bear in mind that the *alef* and the number one, which is its numerical value, also share the same orthographic shape |—a vertical line). By assuming the word *Bahā’* as his name either separately or compounded with Allāh, Bahā’u’llāh emphasized the great value of this most Supreme name of God that begins with the letter *bā’*, which the Bāb, following earlier Shī’ī and Shaykhī tradition, made also the most of its orthographic shape.

When written, the *bā’* is a combination of a horizontal line and a dot underneath it. Without the dot it can easily be regarded as a lying, or horizontal *alef*. There is no need for much imagination to see how this simple orthographical fact could assume mystical interpretation. The vertical *alef* which stands like a wall preventing the penetration of sight or thought either way, the One secret divine essence, which does not allow any apprehension of anything that is “before” or “after,” becomes a flat basis, an open route, a straight line which leads backwards

and forwards. In other words, the vertical *alef*, which points to the unfathomable *Up* and unfathomable *Down*, when turned horizontal becomes the revealed *bā'*: not reality in a physical sense but the reality of the, otherwise, unknown divine essence.

But still the horizontal line is not enough to communicate the true value of the *bā'*, there are others, two or even four letters in the Arabic alphabet which are written as a horizontal line. What makes the *bā'* an independent letter is the dot or the point, underneath it. Only with the point the *bā'* becomes complete, representing the revealed God. This idea was clearly expressed by Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā'ī:

The *bā'* is the form of the divinity which is the representation of (the revealed) Allah, may he be exalted, and it combines the attributes of holiness like: the Exalted, the Holy, the Mighty, the Sublime and so forth, with His attributes of accompaniment like, the All-Knowing, the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing, the All-Able, the All-Commanding, and the similar, with the attributes of creation such as, the Creator, the Provider, the Bestower, and so on. (*Rasā'il*, p.136, quoted by Saeidi 1999:161)

It follows that Shaykh Ahmad agrees that the letter *bā'* is in itself the greatest divine name, as well as the letter opening the name *Bahā'* which is the greatest name of God (*ism allāh al-a'zam*). In specifying the part played by each letter of the alphabet in the world of existence al-Ahsā'ī identifies the letter *bā'* with the Universal Soul, usually the second emanation in the Neoplatonic system, and the universal life-giving power (*bā'ith*). (Cole 1994:4ff.) In other words, in the hierarchy of the existential text that forms by its letters the divine attributes, which represent the revealed God, the letter *bā'* follows the Universal intellect, the very first emanation from the mystery of the hidden eternity of the divine essence. (*cf. ibid.*)

Since the point under the horizontal line is the deciding factor, which gives the letter its true identity, this point is regarded as the point of creation. Without it the letter, which represents the sublime divine name and thus the sum total of the powers of the revealed God, is incomplete. In other words, everything which is symbolized by the *bā'* concentrates in the Point of this letter, and since the prophets and the Imāms, especially the latter, are identical with the creative powers of God, that is to say, identical with his *Names*, then it follows that they are also the Supreme Name of God. For all the names of God, although they are many, are in fact only one, similar to a reflection of the same image in many mirrors, (a simile which the Bāb as well as 'Abbās Effendi ('Abdu'l-Bahā') liked to use. 'Abdu'l Bahā' 1964:113-115).

The point signifying the undefined essence of creation received much attention in Shī'ī as well as Sūfī literature. To 'Alī is attributed the saying that all knowledge is “a point (*nuqtah*), which those who are ignorant multiplied many times.” (*kaththarahā al-jāhilūn*). This saying is quoted by Sa'd ad-Dīn Hamawayh (d. 650/1252 at the opening of *Risālat al-Misbāh*). He goes on to develop the idea of the connection of the point and the Divine Being.

Thou shouldest know that the point consists of three colours, one is black, one is white and one is red. The black indicates the (divine) Essence, the white indicates the Attributes and the red indicates the Creation. (*ibid.*)

The identification of the Imāms with the divine attributes, is best represented in the following saying attributed to no less than ‘Alī b. Abū Tālib: “The secret of the *Basmalah* is in the (letter) *bā’* and the secret of the *bā’* is in the point and I am the point of the *bā’*,” (quoted by Saeidi 1999: 167). Here the Shī‘ite tradition, which was followed by Shaykh Aḥmad and the Bāb, meets the tradition that ascribes the same words: “I am the point of the Beth,” to the Hasidic Rabbi R. Israel of Ruzhin of the early 19th century. The reader can be sure that R. Israel had no knowledge of this Shī‘ī tradition. (I am sure that had ‘Alī been alive when this tradition was ascribed to him he too would not have recognized it). However, mystical minds must sometimes be thinking alike. The question of the letter *bā’* and the point under it can be a subject for very extensive research, which is not my intention. However, the following quotation from *Jamī‘ al-Asrār wa-Manābi‘ al-Anwār* by Shaykh Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī may serve as a summary and elucidation to the above arguments:

The *bā’* is the representation of the apparent reality... just as the *alef* is the representation of the hidden eternal reality... The point under the *bā’*, is the representation of that which is possible (*al-mumkin*)... The saying of Ibn al-‘Arabī: “in the *bā’* the (physical) reality appeared in the point, and the difference between the *created* from the *creator* was established (Āmulī, 700-701).

Tafsīr Basmalah

I have gone into some detail of the subject of the point of the *bā’* not only because of the importance attached to this letter in the Bābī and Bahā’ī Faiths, but also because it is a clear example in the chain of ideas relating to the mystical interpretations of letters leading from the medieval Islamic literature to the schools of thought in the Shī‘ah in modern times, via the Shaykhīs to the Bāb, Bahā’u’llāh and his successors.

In his interpretation of the *Basmalah*, the Bāb searches for the meaning of each one of its letters (but especially the first word “*bism*”) and following the earlier material (whether he read it or not is not clear) finds the connection between the letters and the names of God. He also finds references to the secrets connected with the names of the Imāms ‘Alī, Ḥasan and especially Ḥusayn, who represents the revelation of the Greatest Name of God—Bahā’. The natural continuation of this line of thought must lead to the identification of the reappearance of Ḥusayn, the third Imām, in the form of the Bahā’, namely Bahā’u’llāh, whose name is both Ḥusayn and ‘Alī. (See quotations from the Bāb’s interpretation of the *Basmalah* in Sa‘īdī 1999:167ff.)

As mentioned above on a few occasions, the Medieval Muslim scholars with mystical tendencies, though not necessarily Mystics, occupied themselves with searching the meanings of the alphabet and the numerical values of letters. The interesting thing about this preoccupation is that they examined the Arabic alphabet according to the *abjad* order, namely according to the order of the Hebrew and Aramaic alphabet, on which the numerical values of the letters are based. It is clear, that by using the *a-b-j-d* system, they could deal with each letter as it is written, as the symbol for a divine name, and as a number. (*EP* s.v. “Hurūfiya,” *Rasā’il* 1928, *ibid.*)

In order to legitimize this attitude to the Arabic alphabet, symbolic meanings were searched for the word “*abjad*” and for a verb *bajad* (B-J-D) from which it is derived. It was not difficult to find the verb that denotes certain knowledge and even secret inner knowledge. (*cf. Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. *B-J-D*). Even a *ḥadīth* ascribed to the Prophet was put into circulation, which makes the study of the interpretation of *abjad* incumbent upon every true scholar “Study the *tafsīr* (interpretation) of *abjad* because in it there are all the wonders, and woe to a scholar (‘*ālim*) who is ignorant of its interpretation.” The tradition goes on to say that when the Prophet was asked about the *tafsīr* of *abjad* he proceeded to explain the meaning of each letter in connection with Allah (*alef* is the benefits, or blessings of Allah—*ālā’ allāh*—and the *bā’* is the splendour of Allah—*bahā’ allāh*—and the *jim* is the glory of Allah and the beauty of Allah—*jalāl allāh wa-jamāl allāh*—the *dāl* is the religion of Allah—*dīn allāh*—and so on.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that these terms, which were copied in the 17th century by Fakhr ad-Dīn at-Tirihī (d. 1085/1674) in his dictionary of rare words, *Majma’ al-Bahrayn* (ed. Husaynī 1381/1961) (3):10 s.v. *B-J-D*) together with relevant traditions occupy a central place in the Bābī and Bahā’ī writings in the nineteenth century. Even without having access to the libraries of the Bāb or Bahā’u’llāh it is safe to conclude that this old medieval Islamic knowledge was commonplace among learned people who had been exposed to the study of the Qur’ān and some Shī’ī traditions. The Bāb, who spent, at least some time, with Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī no doubt was exposed to this type of material too.

The Bāb’s occupation with the “science of letters” brought him like the Hasidic Rabbis and Muslim religious figures to practice magic using the same material: Qur’ānic verses, Names of God, letters of the Alphabet, and the five pointed *star*, which represented in his system the human Body (*haykal*). The amulets which he wrote, and which he ordered people to wear, demonstrated his fascination with the power of letters and words. (MacEoin, *loc cit.*, 21)

The similarity between Jewish, Islamic and Bābī-Bahā’ī methods of search after the symbolic, esoteric and mystical interpretation of the letters of the alphabet (usually in relation to the scriptures), should not surprise us. When Islam began developing as a sophisticated religion and culture in the Middle East, it came into contact with the well-established system of studying the letters, their numerical values and hidden meanings. The well-established interest in the

subject came independently from two sources: Jewish and Pythagorean. (Dornseiff 1925:11-14, 20f, 39ff.) There already existed detailed discussions of the subject, the best representative of which is *Sepher Yetzirah*, The Book of Creation, where the mystical meaning of the letters of the alphabet is well established. There is hardly any question as to the antiquity of this book that already in the 10th century was the object of a study and interpretation by the Jewish scholar Sa'adiyah (Sa'adyah) Gaon in Iraq. (Liebes 2000:94ff.)

Adventism

In Christianity the subject of the meaning of letters was also developed (Dornseiff 1925 *passim*). But, as I have already remarked it does not occupy an important place in modern religious movements. On the other hand, calculation based on scriptures relating to the second advent of Jesus is essential in the thinking of all Adventist movements. The disappointment in the date calculated by Miller led to another type of interpretation of the prophecies concerning the messianic expectation. The Seventh-Day Adventists remained with the basic calculations based on Daniel 7–8, according to which 1844 was a year of great significance, though not exactly the year of the Second Advent. The intensive study of the cryptic prophecies in Daniel, and the calculations based on them resulted in very concrete expectations and predicted events. Naturally, unfulfilled, the expectations based on the prediction of Christ coming in 1844, resulted in the most severe disappointment. The Seventh-Day Adventists avoided this disappointment by advancing the idea that while the calculation of the date—1844—is correct, the *meaning* of the prophecy concerning this date was missed. In 1844 Christ is not supposed to begin his millennial ministry on earth.

In 1844, at the end of the prophetic period of 2300 days, He entered the second and last phase of His atoning ministry. It is a work of investigative judgment, which is part of the ultimate disposition of all sin... (*Seventh-Day Adventists Believe*. . . . 1988:312 ff.)

The year 1844 is the year of the Bāb's announcement of his *Bābiyyat*, in the midst of messianic expectation based on calculations, which counted the thousand years, which elapsed since the occultation of the Twelfth Imām. One must admit that *it is an unusual co-incidence*. But let us say immediately that it is nothing more than co-incidence. However, since we are looking for common principal, we can see it also here in two religious movements, far away from each other from every point of view. The principle, which brings them together, is that of messianic expectation, the idea of a second coming, of a hidden Messiah (whether it is the Imām or Jesus).

Jesus is also a Qur'ānic figure; and his (second) coming is expected by Muslims as well as Christians. This fact was enough to mould any Messianic expectation in Islam on the model of 'Īsā (Jesus) (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, on Q, 43:61.1987 (4):143 quoting early authorities; *SEI*

1974:173). Without Jesus' model, and the influence of this model on the early Muslims, one can hardly imagine the birth of the idea of the hidden Imām.

Moreover, the Bāb, and even more so Bahā'u'llāh, in their theory of the Prophet equaling the Manifestation of God, attributed to themselves, as well as to the prophets, the Imāms, and Jesus the position of the Divine Manifestation, and placed them all, following the Shaykhīs in the intermediate world—the *Barzakh* or *Hūrqalyah*. Now, since the Manifestation of God is nothing less than the reappearance of the former manifestations in just a new stage of the development of humanity, the appearance, of Bahā'u'llāh, is nothing less than the re-appearance of Jesus. (*cf.* 'Abdu'l-Bahā', 1964:113f., 171-174)

The Adventists in the West are still awaiting the end of the last stage of Jesus' ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. However, for many Christians not necessarily Adventists, who are eager to witness the fulfillment of their long waiting, Bahā'u'llāh offered the ultimate answer: the end of waiting, the fulfillment of the messianic expectations, the final advent of Jesus which was announced in 1844, and reached its climax with the open claim of Bahā'u'llāh in 1863 that *he* was the Expected One. Without the original Biblical basis, and without the existence of the Christian fundamental belief in the second coming, such a claim could never have succeeded beyond the ocean. (See the method, which 'Abdu'l-Bahā' uses to explain the Second Coming of Christ. 'Abdu'l-Bahā' 1964:110–112)

Summary

We tried to seek a common ground for understanding the unusual appearance of several religions and religious movements towards the Middle of the 19th century, especially the appearance of the Bābī-Bahā'ī Faiths out of Shī'ite Islam in the East and the appearance of Mormonism and Adventism in the Christian world, and the Hasidut in the Jewish world in Eastern Europe (the last being the earliest). We found that although the appearance of these religions and religious movements together is co-incidental, yet at the end they all enjoy a common, ancient cultural basis: Biblical Monotheistic tradition, and deep-rooted classical (mainly Greek) cultural heritage.

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