

The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review

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Note from editor

South East Asia is home to many different religious traditions. It is a region where Hindu, Chinese, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian communities have intermingled for centuries. Since ancient times, it has been the meeting ground for the civilisations of India and China. Its religious and cultural territory spans Confucian Singapore, Buddhist Thailand, Muslim Malaysia and Indonesia, and the Catholic Philippines. Each of these countries contain a significant number of Taoists, Hindus and Christians from a wide variety of different denominations. It is therefore fitting that a Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review journal be dedicated to the Bahá'í principle of the "Fundamental Unity of Religions".

Most of the papers in this volume began as talks given at the 2nd Singapore Bahá'í Studies conference held on the 12th April 1997, at the Kent Vale Community Hall, Singapore. The editor would like to thank the authors whom he closely worked with over the last six months, for their openness, co-operation, and patience. Thanks must also go to Antonella Khursheed for the journal type-setting, and to Lynette Thomas for her meticulous copy-editing, which, in some instances, involved remarkable detective work.

Dr. Anjam Khursheed, editor
October 1997

The Hindu Concept of God: Unity in Diversity

Anjam Khursheed

Abstract

This paper correlates Hindu concepts of God to those found in the Semitic religious tradition and the Bahá'í Faith. By demonstrating the fundamental unity behind these beliefs, different schools of thought within Hinduism are harmonised. Also highlighted, is the spiritual principle of unity in diversity, common both to the metaphysical world-view of Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith. It is suggested that this principle might form the basis by which Hindu and Bahá'í beliefs can come together and further their common goal of uniting the world's spiritual traditions.

1. Introduction

Progressive revelation is the Bahá'í principle that all religions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of mankind, and that each religion is suited to the time and place in which it is revealed. A common misconception about this principle is that the Bahá'í Faith somehow replaces the religions of the past. Since the Bahá'í Faith claims to be the latest religion in this process, it is tempting to conclude that the former religions are no longer relevant to the world's needs, or that they will not play an important role in the future. But a careful investigation into the Bahá'í writings indicates that this conclusion is not implied by the principle of progressive revelation. Moreover, a study into world religious history also indicates that there are limits to understanding the religions of the world merely by placing them in chronological order.

There are passages in the Bahá'í writings that warn against assigning a position of inherent superiority to the Bahá'í Faith with respect to other religions. Shoghi Effendi, the appointed interpreter of the Bahá'í Writings, states that:

“Let no one, however, mistake my purpose. The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.”¹

This passage not only makes it clear that all religions, including the Bahá'í Faith, have “identical aims”, are “complementary in their functions”, are “indispensable in their value to mankind”, but that the Bahá'í Faith must assist someone of another Faith to “obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose”. This means that Bahá'ís are not in competition with members of other Faiths, vying for spiritual

¹ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 57-58

converts. Neither do they seek to "undermine the basis of any man's allegiance" to his or her own spiritual tradition.

The relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to other religions and the nature of progressive revelation is further elaborated in another passage by Shoghi Effendi. Here the danger of relegating other religions to an inferior status is explicitly highlighted, and the fundamental unity of the Bahá'í Faith to all religions is described in terms of the "evolution of one religion",

"Nor does the Bahá'í Revelation, claiming as it does to be the culmination of a prophetic cycle and the fulfilment of the promise of all ages, attempt, under any circumstances, to invalidate those first and everlasting principles that animate and underlie the religions that have preceded it. The God-given authority, vested in each one of them, it admits and establishes as its firmest and ultimate basis. It regards them in no other light except as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part. It neither seeks to obscure their Divine origin, nor to dwarf the admitted magnitude of their colossal achievements. It can countenance no attempt that seeks to distort their features or to stultify the truths which they instill. Its teachings do not deviate a hairbreadth from the verities they enshrine, nor does the weight of its message detract one jot or one tittle from the influence they exert or the loyalty they inspire. Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems, its avowed, its 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 co-ordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations. These divinely-revealed religions, as a close observer

has graphically expressed it, "are doomed not to die, but to be reborn..."²

The Bahá'í approach is one that emphasises the underlying unity behind all religions. It cannot compete with other Faiths because it believes all religions, including itself, to be part of an "evolution of one religion". It aims at "restating the fundamentals" of each Faith, to "reconcile their aims", to "reinvigorate their life", to "demonstrate their oneness", to "restore the pristine purity of their teachings" and to "assist in the realization of their highest aspirations". The task facing Bahá'ís is to bring about the rebirth of the other religions, not to supersede them. This point cannot be overemphasised. Clearly the goal of establishing the unity of religions will involve Bahá'ís and people of other religions working together. This means that each religion will have a part to play in the spiritual future of mankind.

In its goal to unite the world's religious Faiths, to "demonstrate their oneness", the Bahá'í Faith is seeking to do something which has not hitherto been attempted. All religious Faiths have up till now, at least within the orbit of their own sacred scriptures, confined their message to a specific group of people or religious tradition. Of course, many of them hint at a future day, a promised day when peace and unity will be established amongst all people, but that is not the focus of their message. The message in the Hebrew scriptures is largely directed to the Israelites, and its implication for the Gentiles is only hinted at. Christ spoke first and foremost to the Jewish tradition, it was only later taken to the Gentile world by the apostle St Paul. In Islam, the message is for the most part, directed to the People of the Book, that is, to the Christians and Jews. These three religions make up what is known as the Semitic line of religions. They have a common tradition bound together by race and prophecy.

Taking a broad perspective, world religious history would appear to be composed of different lines of religious development: the Semitic tradition, the Indian tradition, the Chinese tradition, and many more native

² Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 114-116

religious traditions, all of which are largely confined both in their written scriptures and oral traditions to a specific race or culture. The Bahá'í aim of establishing the fundamental unity of religions involves widening "the basis" of existing religions by universalising them, so that their "first and everlasting principles" can be shared by people from all traditions.

It would appear that religions have not only been developing chronologically, that is sequentially, the latest one referencing and building on the previous ones, but they have also been developing in parallel. The religions in the Semitic tradition for instance, do not make any reference to the religions which grew up in India and vice versa.

The sequential side of progressive revelation is most clearly illustrated within each religious tradition. On the other hand, the complementary nature of religious truth is visible between different religious traditions. They are by no means mutually exclusive. From the Bahá'í point of view, it is only the secondary aspects of religions that differ, that is in terms of their social laws and observances, but in their fundamental spiritual aspects, they are one. Religions within the same tradition also exhibit complementarity. Interaction between religions of different traditions has also occurred and their history has not been entirely independent, so the picture is not a simple one. The main point here is that religions have developed both sequentially and in parallel.

The Bahá'í Faith's relationship to other religions might be illustrated by two analogies. In the Bahá'í writings, the spiritual development of mankind as a whole is likened to the growth of a human being, who grows through the various stages of childhood, youth and adulthood³. Rejecting the conclusion that each religion is somehow superseded or inferior to the successive one, it is stated that, "does not the child succumb in the youth and the youth in the man; yet neither child or youth perishes"⁴. During childhood, a human being learns fundamental principles which stay with him for the rest of his life, arguably, childhood is the most important period. Most of us in childhood and youth go through various experiences, learn different principles, which are not related together. It is

³ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 114, pp 164-165

⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 114

only usually during the adult phase of our lives that the different experiences of our past are pieced together, put into a wider perspective. It is only usually as an adult that the different lessons of the past acquire a greater meaning. Of course, each phase of our life is equally important, and at any one stage, we are still the same person. Along each phase of our growth, we are discovering more about ourselves. But the consciousness of our self-identity does not fully mature until we are adults, this is the time that we are best able to integrate our different experiences together. The Bahá'í claim is that mankind as a whole is approaching the phase of maturity or adulthood, and is at present caught in the tumultuous phase of the rebellious youth⁵. All religions have taught us fundamental lessons which will always remain, but this is the time in our collective history when all these different past experiences will be brought together.

Another analogy implied in the Bahá'í writings is of different territories on the earth's surface⁶. Viewed from the earth's surface, each territory appears to be separate from the other. Even when standing from the peak of a high mountain, a specific landscape comes into view. The landscape we see depends on our position on the earth. Each territory is beautiful, has its own character, its own climate, its own distinctive terrain. But from above the earth's surface, say from the moon, all territories form the surface of a single planet. Viewed from this cosmological perspective, there is a wider beauty, an underlying unity, a unity in diversity which cannot be seen while standing on the earth's surface. Likewise, each religion has lived within its own cultural climate and has its own distinctive landscape of beliefs. The Bahá'í principle of religious unity involves seeing the underlying spiritual reality behind all religions, taking a global view of our collective religious history.

The goal of world religious unity, as a commandment which is explicitly revealed in sacred scripture, is unique to the Bahá'í Faith. Other religions have been largely confined to a specific culture or people. The diversity and beauty of each religious landscape is enhanced by taking a global view: within the greater landscape, the distinctive character of each

⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 164-165

⁶ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 126

territory is brought into greater perspective. But the goal specifically undertaken by the Bahá'í Faith, is to bring about a greater unity, a planetary consciousness which encompasses all our individual religious traditions and integrates them into a wider single spiritual experience.

The purpose of this paper is to show how the Bahá'í aim of demonstrating the fundamental unity of religions applies to Hinduism. To the casual observer coming from the Semitic line of religions, there are many possible ways in which Hinduism may be misunderstood. Hinduism is often criticised for being polytheistic, anthropomorphic, blasphemous, pantheistic and idolatrous.

It is not difficult to see how modern Hinduism might give rise to such impressions. Taken at face value, Hindus believe in many gods, the three main ones being Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The gods most widely worshipped are Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Ganesha, Murthi and Krishna. Temples are dedicated to Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu and Krishna. In a single temple visit, prayers and offerings are made to different statues, each of which represents a different god. The Hindu typically starts with worshipping the most important deity at the centre, and then makes his or her way around to the lesser ones which encircle it.

Not only are there numerous gods, but they are believed to be related together by family ties. Brahma's wife is a Goddess named Saraswati, while the Goddess married to Vishnu is Lakshmi. The wife of Shiva goes under the name Parvati. Ganesha and Murthi are worshipped as sons of Parvati. For an outsider coming from the Semitic line of religions, these beliefs are not only polytheist but also overtly anthropomorphic.

There is also the issue of apparent idol worship. The god Vishnu for instance, is represented by a blue statue having four arms, holding a conch, discus, mace and lotus flower. Shiva is often depicted as a many-armed dancer having dark skin and wearing a snake around his neck. The son of Parvati, Ganesha, has an elephant's head and a human body. The representation of the Hindu gods is extremely complex, and each god has many different images, but the main point here is that such images and idols are commonly used, and although the gods which they symbolise are believed to be immortal, Omnipresent, and Omniscient, in practice, they

are worshipped in the form of idols. The Hindu practice is seemingly diametrically opposed to say Judaism, whose identifying mark is its monotheistic challenge to abandon the use of idols and graven images, in its message to the people of the ancient world to worship the one invisible God.

At the other extreme, Hinduism is often described as being pantheistic. The unity of God is taken so far, that in the tradition of Advaita Vedanta, a dominant influence in the modern Hindu Faith, the summit of wisdom is related to understanding that the whole universe is God. In the words of Shankara, the medieval sage who reinterpreted ancient Hindu text this way and upon whom the Advaita Vedanta school is based, "Our perception of the universe is a continuous perception of Brahman, though the ignorant man is not aware of this. Indeed, this universe is nothing but Brahman"⁷. This tradition seeks to experience unity with God. Shankara in his moment of enlightenment stated that "I have realized my identity with Brahman"⁸. This conception of God is expressed as the "non-dual" or "monist" conception of Hinduism. Viewed from the perspective of the Semitic line of religions, the Advaita Vedanta school may appear both pantheist and blasphemous.

The extreme monism of the Advaita Vedanta school is closely related to the many forms of monastic and ascetic movements of Hinduism. It was in fact Shankara who set up the first Hindu monastic orders. Many forms of yoga are designed to train a monk in the ways of the Advaita Vedanta school and lead to the mystic union of the sage with God, whereby he realises that he is identical to God.

The Advaita Vedanta has a strong influence on modern movements in India. A disciple of the well-known 19th century sage Ramakrishna, called Naren, at first expressed his scepticism concerning the non-dualist goal of being identical to God, thinking it was blasphemous, but then later came to believe it in his moment of enlightenment. He described his insight in the following way, "Wherever I looked I saw Brahman and Brahman alone. I lived in that consciousness the whole day. I returned

⁷ Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, pp 297-8

⁸ Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, pp 297-8

home, and that same experience continued. When I sat down to eat I saw that the food, plate, the server, and I myself - all were Brahman”⁹. Unlike the saints of the Semitic religions, it is quite natural for the Hindu saint to identify himself to be God.

The Advaita Vedanta is only one movement within Hinduism. There is also the school of “qualified dualism”, based upon the teachings of the medieval theologian Ramanuja. Ramanuja’s theology grew out of his opposition to Shankara’s monism. He likened the relationship between man and God to be similar to the connection between the body and the soul. The soul, though distinct from the body, controls and guides it, lives in it, and uses it as an instrument. Similarly, Brahman is the soul of the universe, ruling over it, directing it.¹⁰ There are other strands of Hindu thought which also oppose Shankara’s extreme monism, so it must be remembered that the tendency of the Hindu sage to identify himself with God is not universally accepted within Hinduism.

This paper aims to demonstrate the fundamental unity of Hinduism with the Semitic line of religions. Monotheism in the Hindu Faith is present in the form of a superior background principle, which while not rejecting polytheistic and anthropomorphic practices, transcends them. Apart from the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, use of the Bahá’í concepts of God, human nature and progressive revelation are correlated with Hindu beliefs. A major strength of Hinduism will be highlighted, namely its inherent principle of unity in diversity with respect to its religious practices and concept of God. Generally speaking, this aspect of Hinduism has made it a non-dogmatic Faith and has protected it from many of the divisive doctrinal disputes that have occurred in other religions. This principle of unity in diversity with respect to its metaphysical beliefs and religious worship is in harmony with similar principles within the Bahá’í Faith.

⁹ Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 351

¹⁰ see chapter 19 of *The Spiritual Heritage of India*

2. The Vedas

One of the most common statements made about Hinduism is that unlike other religions, it has no single founder. This statement is both true and false. It is true that Hinduism cannot be compared to Islam or Christianity, each of which has a single founder and a single holy book. It is false, because Hinduism can be compared to Judaism, where the long line of Hebrew prophets who emerge out of antiquity bear resemblance to the long line of Hindu sages, who also stretch back into the beginning of recorded history.

Although the entire corpus of Hindu literature is vast, the number of texts which all Hindus regard as sacred is much smaller. The scripture known as the Vedas are the oldest and date from around 1500 BC to 1200 BC. It is impossible to put an exact date to these texts, let alone know anything about the sages who wrote them.

The Vedas themselves consist of different parts. There is the part known as "Samhitas", which consist of mantras or hymns of praise to various nature gods. There is the part that relates to the details of sacrificial rites, duties and conduct, known as "Brahmanas". This is complemented by a part called "Aranyakas" which provide the spiritual meaning to the sacrifices and rites. But it is the last part of the Vedas, the part dealing with knowledge, the "Upanishads", that is by far the most widely read section of the Vedic lore.

The large pantheon of Vedic gods are similar to the nature gods of other ancient cultures. They are for the most part linked to the natural elements which sustain human life and are conceived of in familiar human terms. In one hymn, Indra, the rain god, has a body clad in golden armour, descends to earth where he lives and eats with his votaries, fights and overcomes his enemies, and establishes his dominion. At times, a god is understood to be both the provider of the moral order as well as the physical one. This is the case with the sky god Varuna, who was believed to be both omnipresent and a god of righteousness who had the power to forgive sins.

There are some signs of monotheism in the predominantly polytheistic Vedic period. There is a well known verse in the *Reg-Veda*, an early set of Vedic hymns, which states, "They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni and it is the heavenly bird that flies. The wise speak of what is One in many ways; they call it Agni, Yama, Mitarisvan." (*Reg-Veda I: 164: 46*). This passage indicates that there was a monotheist belief in the spiritual unity underlying the diversity of the Vedic gods.

There are also other indications of an early form of monotheism. The creation hymn of the "Golden Embryo" describes a "lord of creation" who precedes all the gods and is the unitary cause of creation

"In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and this sky. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation? He who gives life, who gives strength, whose command all the gods, his own, obey; his shadow is immortality - and death. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation? He who by his greatness became the one King of the world that breathes and blinks, who rules over his two-footed and four-footed creatures - who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation? O Prajapati, lord of progeny, no one but you embraces all these creatures. Grant us the desires for which we offer you oblation. Let us be lords of riches." (*Reg-Veda 10: 121*)

Prajapati represents the unitary godhead of the Vedic period. He is conceived of both as a principle of righteousness and the Father of creation. There is also reference to the "One" of the famous Creation Hymn, which describes the primordial cause behind all phenomena, preceding "non-existence and existence".

"There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep? There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That One breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond. Darkness was hidden by darkness in the

beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that One arose through the power of heat. Desire came upon that One in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence. Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving forth above. Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows why hence it has arisen? Whence this creation has arisen - perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not - the One who looks down on it, the highest heaven, only He knows - or perhaps He does not know.”
(Reg-Veda 10:129)

The main theme that emerges from these passages is the spiritual unity underlying the apparent diversity of creation. Although the gods were believed to be immortal, they were still considered to be a part of creation. The “gods came afterwards”, whereas the One preceded everything. This unity in diversity is characteristic of Hinduism throughout its long history. The unity of the Godhead transcends the diversity of the gods, not by rejecting it, as it was done in the Semitic line of religions, but by being present at a higher level.

3. The Upanishads

The trend towards unity in the early Vedic period reaches its climax in the Upanishads. Little is known about the sages who wrote the Upanishads, and their date, as with other ancient Hindu literature is not known exactly. Scholars think that the Upanishads may have been written between 800-200 BC.

3.1 The Unknowable God

In the Upanishads, there are many points of similarity to the Semitic religious tradition. A clear point of unity between the Semitic religions and the Upanishads is the transcendent nature of God. All concepts of God, according to the Upanishads are inherently inaccurate. God is unlike anything which the mind of man can conceive. Ultimately, the most accurate description of God is no description at all. Like the *via negativa* of the medieval Semitic theologians, the Upanishads describe God as "not this, not that", that is, in the negative form

" The Intelligence which reveals all - by what shall it be revealed? By whom shall the knower be known? The Self is described as not this, not that. It is incomprehensible, for it cannot be comprehended; undecaying, for it never decays; unattached, for it never attaches itself; unbound, for it is never bound. By whom, O my beloved, shall the Knower be known"
(Bhhadaranyaka Upanishad 4: 5: 15).

In another passage, the sages of the Upanishads clearly imply that the most common conceptions of God in their time were mistaken, that is, too literal, and that Brahman is beyond all the words, thoughts and images that the mind of man can conjure up

"What cannot be spoken with words, but that whereby words are spoken: Know that alone to be Brahman, Spirit; and not what people here adore. What cannot be thought with the mind, but that whereby the mind can think: Know that alone to be Brahman, the Spirit; and not what people here adore. What cannot be seen with the eye, but that whereby the eye can see: Know that alone to be Brahman, the Spirit; and not what people here adore..."
(Kena Upanishad 1: 1-3)

The parallels to the "God who hidest thyself" (Isaiah 45: 15) of Judaism, or the God "beyond all that they describe of Him" (Quran 6:100) in Islam

is obvious. God in one passage of the Upanishads, is even defined as silence

“Sir”, said a pupil to his master, “teach me the nature of Brahman”. The master did not reply. When a second and a third time he was importuned, he answered: “I teach you indeed, but you do not follow. His name is silence”¹¹.

There is a similarity here with Buddha's apparent silence on God. Rather than his silence being the negation of the concept of God, perhaps it was God's unknowability that he wanted to express.

The Upanishads transcend the polytheism of the Vedas. The Vedic gods, whenever they are mentioned in the Upanishads, are either expressions of Brahman in the created world, or they are vying with one another to know Brahman (Kena Upanishads Part3 and 4). The unknowability of God, as stated in the Upanishads, avoids the danger of anthropomorphism, and the nature of the Vedic gods appear to be comparable to the character of “angels” in the Semitic religions, rather than being the unitary Godhead which is above all likeness.

In the Bahá'í writings, the incomprehensible nature of God is mentioned on many occasions. Bahá'u'lláh explicitly states that, “Immeasurably exalted is He above the strivings of the human mind to grasp His Essence, or of human tongue to describe His mystery”¹². In the Seven Valleys, in connection with a human being trying to fathom the mystery of God, Bahá'u'lláh asks, “How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of pre-existence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun.”¹³ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, expanding on this latter image, likens man's relationship to God in the following way, “The furthestmost limits of this bird of clay are these: he can flutter along for some short

¹¹ Quoted by Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 45,

¹² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 317-18

¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p 23

distance, into the endless vast; but he can never soar upward to the Sun in the high Heavens”¹⁴.

The Bahá'í writings explain that although God is infinite and boundless, when He appears in the world of “creatures”, He takes on a form and limitation that is finite, restricted by whatever reveals Him. Like the rain, which although formless, takes on the form and shape of the container which it fills, God cannot be contained within the world of creation

“God’s grace is like the rain that cometh down from heaven: the water is not bounded by the limitations of form, yet on whatever place it poureth down, it taketh on limitations - dimensions, appearance, shape - according to the characteristics of that place. In a square pool, the water, previously unconfined, becometh a square; in a six-sided pool it becometh a hexagon... The rain itself hath no geometry, no limits, no form... In the same way, the Holy Essence of the Lord God is boundless, immeasurable, but His graces and splendours become finite in the creatures”¹⁵

From the Bahá'í point of view, whatever the mind of man may conceive of as God, is by definition, not God.

3.2 The Immanent God

The “One” underlying creation, hinted at in the Vedic period, in the Upanishads, now unites man to the cosmos. The spirit that precedes and sustains the physical cosmos is identified to be the same spirit which dwells within the soul of man. Some of the most poetic statements about man’s unity to God in the world’s sacred scriptures are to be found in the Upanishads. The inner universe is likened to be as vast as the physical cosmos, and both these worlds find their unity in Brahman

¹⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p 47

¹⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p 161

is obvious. God in one passage of the Upanishads, is even defined as silence

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There is a similarity here with Buddha's apparent silence on God. Rather than his silence being the negation of the concept of God, perhaps it was God's unknowability that he wanted to express.

The Upanishads transcend the polytheism of the Vedas. The Vedic gods, whenever they are mentioned in the Upanishads, are either expressions of Brahman in the created world, or they are vying with one another to know Brahman (Kena Upanishads Part3 and 4). The unknowability of God, as stated in the Upanishads, avoids the danger of anthropomorphism, and the nature of the Vedic gods appear to be comparable to the character of “angels” in the Semitic religions, rather than being the unitary Godhead which is above all likeness.

In the Bahá'í writings, the incomprehensible nature of God is mentioned on many occasions. Bahá'u'lláh explicitly states that, “Immeasurably exalted is He above the strivings of the human mind to grasp His Essence, or of human tongue to describe His mystery”¹². In the Seven Valleys, in connection with a human being trying to fathom the mystery of God, Bahá'u'lláh asks, “How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of pre-existence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun.”¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, expanding on this latter image, likens man's relationship to God in the following way, “The furthestmost limits of this bird of clay are these: he can flutter along for some short

¹¹ Quoted by Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 45,

¹² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 317-18

¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p 23

distance, into the endless vast; but he can never soar upward to the Sun in the high Heavens”¹⁴.

The Bahá'í writings explain that although God is infinite and boundless, when He appears in the world of “creatures”, He takes on a form and limitation that is finite, restricted by whatever reveals Him. Like the rain, which although formless, takes on the form and shape of the container which it fills, God cannot be contained within the world of creation

“God’s grace is like the rain that cometh down from heaven: the water is not bounded by the limitations of form, yet on whatever place it poureth down, it taketh on limitations - dimensions, appearance, shape - according to the characteristics of that place. In a square pool, the water, previously unconfined, becometh a square; in a six-sided pool it becometh a hexagon... The rain itself hath no geometry, no limits, no form... In the same way, the Holy Essence of the Lord God is boundless, immeasurable, but His graces and splendours become finite in the creatures”¹⁵

From the Bahá'í point of view, whatever the mind of man may conceive of as God, is by definition, not God.

3.2 The Immanent God

The “One” underlying creation, hinted at in the Vedic period, in the Upanishads, now unites man to the cosmos. The spirit that precedes and sustains the physical cosmos is identified to be the same spirit which dwells within the soul of man. Some of the most poetic statements about man’s unity to God in the world’s sacred scriptures are to be found in the Upanishads. The inner universe is likened to be as vast as the physical cosmos, and both these worlds find their unity in Brahman

¹⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p 47

¹⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p 161

“ In the centre of the castle of Brahman, our own body, there is a small shrine in the form of a lotus-flower, and within can be found a small space. We should find who dwells there, and we should want to know him... the little space within the heart is as great as this vast universe. The heavens and the earth are there, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars; fire and lightning and winds are there; and all that now is and all that is not: for the whole universe is in Him and He dwells within our heart”.

(Chandogya Upanishad, 8.1).

In another passage, God's presence is stated to lie at the very centre of the 'human heart', "He is immeasurable in his light and beyond all thought, and yet he shines smaller than the smallest. Far, far away is he, and yet he is very near, resting in the inmost chamber of the heart". (Mundaka Upan. 3:1:7).

There are other passages in the Upanishads that suggest that of all the signs of God's presence in the universe, the greatest is reflected in the heart of man, "There is a light that shines beyond all things on earth, beyond us all, beyond the heavens, beyond the highest, the very highest heavens. This is the Light that shines in our heart". (Chandogya 3: 13:7).

There are similar sentiments in other Faiths. The notion of man being created in God's image, a belief reiterated in the sacred scriptures of all the Semitic religions, is expressive of man having a special connection to God. In the New Testament, Christ states that, "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17: 20). Also in the same scripture, it is said that, "Surely you know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you" (I Cor. 3:16). In the Quran, there is a verse which reads, "And We know what his soul whispers within him, and we are nearer to him than the jugular vein" (1:15), or another which states, "We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within the world and within themselves" (41: 53). Similarly, an old Islamic hadith states, "Dost thou reckon thyself a puny mortal form, when within thee the universe is folded?"¹⁶.

¹⁶ quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, p 34

But passages of this kind from the Semitic religions are relatively few in number, and it is the transcendent conception of God which predominates. In the Upanishads however, the Immanent conception of God plays a much more central role. Take for instance the metaphor of the "City of God" which appears in the bible as well as the Upanishads. In the Old Testament, the City of God is used as a title to refer to a specific place, that is, the City of Jerusalem (Ps. 87: 3, 48:1-8, 46: 4). It is mentioned alongside God's Holy mountain, Zion (Ps 48: 1-2), and referred to as "the sacred house of the Most High (Ps. 46:4)". The 'City of God' of the Old Testament is described as a "fortress" which protects the Jewish people from the other nations, and from which God rules over the world (Ps 48:3). It is also referred to as the "Temple of God", where the Jewish people think of "God's constant love" (Ps 48: 9). In the New Testament, the City of God is also mentioned as the City of Jerusalem, and also as the prophesised New Jerusalem (Heb. 12: 22, Rev. 3:12). In the Christian tradition, the famous St Augustin of Hippo wrote a book entitled "City of God" in the early part of the 5th century AD, where he took it mainly to refer to the Christian Faith.

In Hinduism, the "City of God" is never taken to refer to a physical place, or a specific Faith. It refers to a universal inner spiritual condition, "He who knows all and sees all, and whose glory the Universe shows, dwells as the Spirit of the divine city of Brahman in the region of the human heart." In fact in the Upanishads, the City of God is used as a metaphor to convey the inherent nearness of God to man, but because men's knowledge of themselves is superficial, they fail to see that inner city, "As one not knowing that a golden treasure lies buried beneath his feet, may walk over it again and again, yet never find it, so all beings live every moment in the City of Brahman, yet never find him because of the veil of illusion by which He is concealed. The Sage resides within the lotus of the heart. Knowing this, consecrated to the Self, the sage enters daily that holy sanctuary."¹⁷

The sentiment expressed by this passage is neither dualist nor monist. It is one element of a tripartite system where God forms the link that binds man to the cosmos. The spirit of Brahman in man, Atman, is likened to

¹⁷ Quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 72

be a bridge between time and Eternity, and only the experience of spiritual enlightenment and pure actions can cross it,

“There is a bridge between time and Eternity; and this bridge is Atman, the Spirit of man. Neither day nor night cross that bridge, nor old age, nor death nor sorrow. Evil or sin cannot cross that bridge, because the world of the Spirit is pure. This is why when this bridge has been crossed, the eyes of the blind can see, the wounds of the wounded are healed, and the sick man becomes whole from his sickness. To one who goes over that bridge, the night becomes like day; because in the worlds of the Spirit there is a Light which is everlasting.”

(Chandogya Upanishad 8.4.1)

This passage has obvious parallels to the words of Isaiah, which were often repeated by Christ, where the act of having faith in God's message gives “eyes to the blind”, “ears to the deaf”, “heals the sick”, and gives “life” to the “dead” (John 12: 40). It is also reminiscent of the words of Isaiah when he states, “The sun shall be no more thy light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory” (Isaiah 60: 19).

In the Bahá'í writings, the Immanent tradition, of God being reflected in the heart of man is given special importance

“O My Brother! A pure heart is as a mirror; cleanse it with the burnish of love and severance from all save God, that the true sun may shine within it and the eternal morning dawn. Then wilt thou clearly see the meaning of ‘Neither doth My earth nor My heaven contain Me, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me.’ And thou wilt take up thy life in thine hand, and with infinite longing cast it before the new Beloved One. Whensoever the light of Manifestation of the King of Oneness settleth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His shining becometh visible in every limb and member. At that time the mystery of the famed tradition gleameth out of

the darkness: "A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him; and when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth..." For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light. And the action and effect of the light are from the Light-Giver; so it is that all move through Him and arise by His will. And this is that spring whereof the near ones drink, as it is said: "A fount whereof the near unto God shall drink..."¹⁸

Here, Bahá'u'lláh quotes examples of past Immanent traditions, where the human heart is believed to contain a greater measure of God's signs than 'Earth' or 'Heaven'. In the above citation it is referred to as God's home. In another passage, Bahá'u'lláh expands on the same theme in the following way

"Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him. Even as He hath said: "Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery." Manifold are the verses that have been repeatedly revealed in all the Heavenly Books and the Holy

¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp 21-22

Scriptures, expressive of this most subtle and lofty theme. Even as He hath revealed: "We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves." Again He saith: "And also in your own selves: will ye not, then, behold the signs of God?" And yet again He revealeth: "And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves." In this connection, He Who is the eternal King - may the souls of all that dwell within the mystic Tabernacle be a sacrifice unto Him - hath spoken: "He hath known God who hath known himself." ...From that which hath been said it cometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God." ¹⁹

This passage bears close resemblance to many passages in the Upanishads which declare the Atman, the Self, the Spirit of Brahman, to be the Light animating the world of creation, and imply that it is reflected to a supreme degree in the heart of man.

"The light of the Atman, the Spirit, is invisible, concealed in all beings. It is seen by the seers of the subtle, when their vision is keen, and is clear"
(Katha Upanishad, 3: 12)

"Always dwelling within all beings is the Atman, the Purusha, the Self, a little flame in the heart. Let one with steadiness withdraw him from the body even as an inner stem is withdrawn from its sheath. Know this pure immortal light; know in truth this pure immortal life"
(Katha Upanishad, 6: 17)

"In the supreme golden chamber is Brahman indivisible and pure. He is the radiant light of all lights and this

¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 177-178

knows he who knows Brahman... From his light all these give light; and his radiance illumines all creation".
(Mundaka Upanishad II, 2: 9-10)

"Even as the radiance of the Sun shines everywhere in space, so does the glory of God rule over his creation"
(Svetasvatara Upanishad, 5: 4)

"Even as a mirror of gold, covered by dust, when cleared well shines again in full splendour, when a man has seen the Truth of the Spirit he is one with him, the aim of his life is fulfilled and he is ever beyond sorrow. The soul of man becomes a lamp by which he finds the Truth of Brahman... This is the God whose light illumines all creation"
(Svetasvatara Upanishad, 2: 14-16)

"Brahman is seen in a pure soul as in a mirror clear and also in the Creator's heaven as clear as light"
(Katha Upanishad, 6: 5)

"Who denies God, denies himself. Who affirms God, affirms himself"
(Taittiriya Upanishad, 2: 6)

The Hindu Atman, or Spirit of Brahman, has parallels to the Holy Spirit of Christianity. In the Bahá'í writings, an explanation of the Christian Trinity is given in terms of an analogy using the sun, its rays, and a perfect mirror. God is likened to the sun, and the rays of the sun which fall upon the earth and give it life, are likened to the Holy Spirit, and Christ is represented by the perfect mirror²⁰. As the above passages show, both in the Hindu writings and the Bahá'í writings, the presence of God in man is likened to being an inner sun, a self-luminous eternal light. These metaphors of light, are obviously in one way or another related to man being an image of God, reflecting God's eternal light. On this point, there is evident harmony between the Upanishads and the Semitic religions.

²⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 113-5

How does God's light in man relate to the *via negativa* tradition, which states that direct knowledge of God is impossible for man? The Bahá'í writings resolve this paradox by identifying knowledge of one's inmost self to be the acme of the spiritual development possible for man, and stating that this knowledge is quite different from direct knowledge of God. From the Bahá'í point of view, the qualities of God that we are familiar with, the "All-Knowing", "the All-Powerful", the "Omniscient", etc, have actually nothing to do with the world of God. Viewed in this way, even the duty given to us to praise God, is actually for our own benefit, for our own self-discovery and self-development.

"Far, far from Thy glory be what mortal man can confirm of Thee, or attribute unto thee, or the praise with which he can glorify Thee! Whatever duty Thou has prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves."²¹

The Immanent tradition, although containing many statements which appear to make the inner self of man identical to God, from the Bahá'í perspective, do not actually refer to the world of God, but refer to signs of God in the world of creation. Although we speak of the attributes of God within us, they refer to the best in human nature and not anything which is inherently about God. The Bahá'í view is very clear on this point. After describing the presence of God within man and giving examples of the Immanent tradition, Bahá'u'lláh clearly distinguishes between this tradition and pantheism or anthropomorphism.

"However, let none construe these utterances to be anthropomorphism, nor see in them the descent of the worlds of God into the grades of the creatures; nor should they lead thine Eminence to such assumptions. For God is, in His Essence, holy above ascent and descent, entrance and exit; He hath through all eternity

²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 4-5

been free of the attributes of human creatures, and ever will remain so. No man hath ever known Him; no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being. Every mystic knower hath wandered far astray in the valley of the knowledge of Him; every saint hath lost his way in seeking to comprehend His Essence. Sanctified is He above the understanding of the wise; exalted is He above the knowledge of the knowing! The way is barred and to seek it is impiety; His proof is His signs; His being is His evidence.... Yea, these mentionings that have been made of the grades of knowledge relate to the knowledge of the Manifestations of that Sun of Reality, which casteth Its light upon the Mirrors. And the splendor of that light is in the hearts, yet it is hidden under the veilings of sense and the conditions of this earth, even as a candle within a lantern of iron, and only when the lantern is removed doth the light of the candle shine out. In like manner, when thou strippest the wrappings of illusion from off thine heart, the lights of oneness will be made manifest.... "Knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it." ²²

Here, the knowledge of God is related to His "Manifestations", or his "Mirrors" in the world of creation. These Mirrors of God's light are equated with the founders of religion, a Christ, a Moses, a Muhammad, a Krishna, a Buddha etc. It is important to note that coming to a realisation of one's identity with God is inextricably linked to becoming selfless, of stripping away the "wrappings of illusion from off thine heart". In terms of the mirror analogy often given in the Bahá'í writings, polishing the mirror of our hearts results in the greater reflection of the sun's (God's) light. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "Souls are like unto mirrors, and the bounty of God is like unto the sun. When the mirrors pass beyond all colouring and attain purity and polish, and are confronted with the sun, they will reflect in full perfection its light and glory" ²³

²² Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, pp 18-25

²³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p 367

Man's unity with God is attained by him becoming selfless, so that he can better reflect the light of the eternal Self. But from the Bahá'í point of view, as with the Semitic religious tradition, the act of being selfless does not bring man directly into contact with God, just as polishing a mirror does not mean that the mirror somehow reaches the sun: in a polished mirror we see a clearer image of the sun, but the mirror is still very different from the sun. In the same way, a selfless life becomes one with God's signs in the world of creation.

In the Upanishads, the situation is very similar to the Bahá'í position. As already quoted, the most common metaphor to express man's unity with God is the light simile, where the light of Atman is reflected in the heart of the sage: "Brahman is seen in a pure soul as in a mirror clear and also in the Creator's heaven as clear as light" (Katha Upanishad, 6: 5)

Another metaphor mentioned in the Upanishads expressing the unity of the sage to God is water dissolving into an ocean, "As rivers flowing into the ocean find their final peace and their name and form disappear, even so the wise become free from name and form and enter into the radiance of the Supreme Spirit who is greater than all greatness. In truth who knows God becomes God." (Mundaka Upanishad III, 2: 8-9). But even here, there are traces of the light image, "enter into the radiance of the Supreme Spirit". There are other passages which make it clear that even if Brahman is envisaged as something in which all things flow, yet He is "still the same", that He in some sense lies beyond them, "filled with Brahman are the things we see; filled with Brahman are the things we see not; from out of Brahman floweth all that is; from Brahman all - yet is he still the same."²⁴ This passage refutes the common misconception that Hinduism is pantheist.

In the Upanishads, the picture of God's presence in the universe is one of unity in diversity. God's relationship to the universe is likened to the sun's connection to the earth: the sun's light illumines the earth and is responsible for the development of all the diverse forms of life on it. On the other hand, the sun is independent of the earth, and is unaffected by it:

²⁴ Peace Chant in the Upanishads of the White Yajur Veda, quoted by Prabhavananda in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 43

“As fire, though one, takes new forms in all things that burn, the Spirit, though one, takes new forms in all things that live. He is within all, and is also outside. As the wind, though one, takes new forms in whatever it enters, the Spirit, though one, takes new forms in all things that live. He is within all, and is also outside. As the sun that beholds the world is untouched by earthly impurities, so the Spirit that is in all things is untouched by external sufferings. There is one Ruler, the Spirit that is in all things, who transforms his own form into many. Only the wise who see him in their souls attain the joy eternal.”

(Katha Upanishad, 5: 9-12)

Within this image of unity in diversity, there is the key to resolving the conflict between the dualist and monist schools of Hinduism, between the Shankara school of Advaita Vedanta and Ramanuja's school of qualified dualism. The monist position holds that only God is the reality, and all notions of human separateness is an illusion. This position seems to imply that the human soul has no separate self-identity. In fact the goal of human life is often expressed as eliminating self-identity, and declaring that “I am God”²⁵. But in terms of the analogy just outlined, the monist position need not be understood in this way.

The monist belief is equivalent to believing that only the sun is the independent reality, the only self-luminous reality, and all else either reflects the sun's light or in some way depends on it. Without the sun's light, all the diverse forms of life on earth would perish. To state that God is the only reality is perfectly consistent with the belief that life on earth is separate from the sun, that God is independent of His creation, the dualist position. All life on earth is sustained by a unitary source, the sun's light, but the creatures which are to be found on it are not identical to the sun. The dualist's position may be represented by the sun's independence from whatever happens on the earth. Whatever man does, it does not affect the sun, the sun is independent of the earth.

²⁵ Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 351

The monist insight is better stated in terms of being selfless, rather than being identical to God. Differences on the earthly landscape are not due to the light itself, which is one. In the Bahá'í writings, the unity in diversity theme is also expressed by the sun's relationship to the earth. The sun is the unitary source which sustains the diversity of life inhabiting the earth,

“Consider the visible sun; although it shineth with one radiance upon all things, and at the behest of the King of Manifestation bestoweth light on all creation, yet in each place it becometh manifest and sheddeth its bounty according to the potentialities of that place. For instance, in a mirror it reflecteth its own disk and shape, and this is due to the sensitivity of the mirror; in a crystal it maketh fire to appear, and in other things it showeth only the effect of its shining, but not its full disk. And yet, through that effect, by the command of the Creator, it traineth each thing according to the quality of that thing, as thou observest. In like manner, colors become visible in every object according to the nature of that object. For instance, in a yellow globe, the rays shine yellow; in a white the rays are white; and in a red, the red rays are manifest. Then these variations are from the object, not from the shining light. And if a place be shut away from the light, as by walls or a roof, it will be entirely bereft of the splendor of the light, nor will the sun shine thereon.... In sum, the differences in objects have now been made plain. Thus when the wayfarer gazeth only upon the place of appearance - that is, when he seeth only the many-colored globes - he beholdeth yellow and red and white; hence it is that conflict hath prevailed among the creatures, and a darksome dust from limited souls hath hid the world. And some do gaze upon the effulgence of the light; and some have drunk of the wine of oneness and these see nothing but the sun itself...”²⁶

²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp 18-21

This passage makes clearer the difference between the monist and dualist approach. The monist approach focuses on the colourless formless light of the sun, to "see nothing but the sun itself." In another passage Bahá'u'lláh cites the following Islamic Hadith, "Knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it" ²⁷. On the other hand, the dualist position would be to emphasise the dependence of all living things on the light of the sun, which is self-luminous, intrinsically different from the objects of its illumination. All earthly objects only reflect and absorb the sun's light, and to conceive of man being directly united with God is in the Bahá'í writings, likened to a "bird of clay" reaching the sun. Viewed in this way, both the monist and dualist approaches are equally valid and they do not contradict one another.

According to the Upanishads, gaining an insight into the unity in diversity of God's presence in the universe is the hallmark of spiritual enlightenment, and the soul of the sage who comes to this realisation will attain inner harmony:

"Who sees the many and not the One, wanders on from death to death. Even by the mind this truth is to be learned: there are not many but only ONE. Who sees variety and not the unity wanders on from death to death. The soul dwells within us, a flame the size of a thumb. When it is known as the Lord of the past and the future, then ceases all fear: This in truth is That... As water raining on a mountain-ridge runs down the rocks on all sides, so the man who only sees variety of things runs after them on all sides. But as pure water raining on pure water becomes one and the same, so becomes, O Nachiketas, the soul of the sage who knows"

(Katha Upanishad, 4: 10-15)

Going beyond duality does not mean that man becomes directly united with God, but that man becomes selfless, and in doing so, reflects to a greater degree the eternal light of God's spirit in the world of creation:

²⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp 24-25

"As long as there is duality, one sees the other, one hears the other, one smells the other, one speaks to the other, one thinks of the other, one knows the other; but when for the illumined soul the all is dissolved in the Self, who is there to be seen by whom, who is there to be smelt by whom, who is there to be heard by whom, who is there to be spoken to by whom, who is there to be thought of by whom, who is there to be known by whom?"²⁸

Knowledge of the 'Spirit' is in effect, knowledge of the Spirit's light in our inner world, "I know the Spirit Supreme, radiant like the sun beyond darkness" (Svetasvatara Upanishad, 3: 8).

Often, the Semitic religious traditions are type-cast as dualist, and the Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism or the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism are described as monist. In an effort to overcome this seeming contradiction between religions, Momen proposes that the philosophy of 'Relativism', become a 'basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics'²⁹. He argues, quite persuasively, that the Bahá'í approach to God is not an objective one, since knowledge of God involves the process of self-discovery, God will be approached in many different ways, and there will not be one way which is superior to another. In terms of the above analogy given of the sun shining on the earthly landscape: each object reflects and absorbs the light of the sun according to its own inherent material type. Similarly, each human being approaches God differently, in a way that best releases his or her own spiritual potential. The Bahá'í approach is not dogmatic about conceptions of God, rather, it allows for a unity in diversity of approaches, since ultimately, each person's concept of God depends on his or her own distinctive spiritual path. The process of self-discovery is irreducibly subjective and personal. This personal conception of God is also quite characteristic of the Hindu approach.

But the step of describing God in the terms of a philosophy of relativism is questionable. Philosophies based upon relativism have a lingering self-

²⁸ quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 44

²⁹ *Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics*, by Moojan Momen, Studies in the Babi and Bahá'í Religions, vol. 5, p185-217

defeat about them: if all world views are equally valid and recommendable, then there is nothing to recommend the world view which advocates relativism, as opposed say to an exclusivist world view. There is also nothing in relativism that provides for unity. Conceptually, we are unique, but there must be something universal about our spiritual intuitions and experience, otherwise, there would be no basis upon which we could share them. What is missing is that apart from being subjective, our experiences are also inter-subjective and trans-personal. For real communication to be possible, objectivity underlies subjectivity, operating as a higher principle.

Another way to express this is to speak of unity in diversity. At a superficial level there is diversity, at a deeper level, there is unity. In terms of the sun-landscape analogy, diversity of life is an integral characteristic of the landscape. Likewise, variety is intrinsic to human concepts about God. Each individual has his or her unique approach to God, which is irreducibly subjective, irreducibly linked to his or her own inner being. On the other hand, the light of the sun shines on all living beings and is responsible for their development. In the same way, individuals or religions may vary about how they describe God, but they all believe God is somehow related to their spiritual growth.

All religious people believe in a purpose to life, rather than it being meaningless. Even at a metaphysical level, there are common features to religious world-views, as opposed to say a secular one. On a spiritual level, the unity is more apparent. The spiritual light which is reflected in the lives of all holy souls, from whatever tradition they come, is remarkably similar.

4. The Epics and the Bhagavad Gita

The period of the Epics is usually placed just after the Upanishads. The two great stories which define this era, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are an integral part of popular Indian culture. Both these Epics are set in the form of legendary stories, where good eventually defeats evil. In their heroic adventures involving gods and demons, many important moral truths of Hinduism are cast in a form which is accessible

to all strata of society. Rama in the Ramayana Epic is comparable to Moses of the Old Testament. Like Moses, Rama receives the calling of a divine mission. Through divine assistance, he rescues his wife Sita from King Ravana of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), defeats Ravana and his army, and frees the people of Ceylon from Ravana's evil rule. This is similar to the story of Moses, where with the help of divine interventions, Moses defeats the evil Egyptian Pharaoh and succeeds in freeing the Jewish people. Both stories are surrounded by myths and legends, and more importantly, both stories contain moral truths about how man should follow God's commandments, and respond to God's message.

Also appearing in the Epics period is the Bhagavad-Gita, or Song of God, the most popular work in all the religious literature of India. It is often referred to as the "Holy Bible of India"³⁰. Although this great document is embedded in a book of the Mahabharata, it in many ways, stands independent from it. The Bhagavad-Gita records the words of Krishna, representing the Voice of God, who not only reiterates the truths of the Vedas and Upanishads, but introduces new perspectives into the Hindu worldview. These words are spoken to the warrior Arjuna in the midst of a battle between Arjuna and his cousins. Arjuna had lost his composure and was overwhelmed by the futility of the war, and Krishna's reassuring words describe a much more fundamental battle, the inner battle of the soul in its struggle to find peace, immortality and wisdom.

4.1 The Incarnation of God

The period of the Epics is important for many different reasons. It is in the Epics that the various incarnations of the god Vishnu are described. Many of these incarnations date from the Vedic period, while others come from the Epic period, when the god Vishnu rose into prominence. The first three incarnations, Matsya (fish), Kurma (Tortoise) and Varaha (boar) have a cosmic character, and stem from the Vedic hymns. The fourth, Narashimha (man-lion), seems to belong to a later period, when the worship of Vishnu became established. The fifth, Vamana (the dwarf), whose strides save the earth seems to come from the Vedic period. The

³⁰ see Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 95

sixth, seventh and eighth, Parasurama, Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, and Krishna come at a later date.

Each human incarnation of Vishnu is known as an Avatar, and has striking similarity to the incarnation of the Word of God as described in Christianity. For this reason, the stories of Vishnu as Preserver, incarnating himself whenever there is corruption in the world, is more than of passing interest for people coming from the Semitic tradition.

God in the Old Testament is spoken about indirectly. The Hebrew prophets presented themselves as inspired men who were charged with the task of delivering God's message to His people. God communicated with them in the form of visions and dreams, and they relayed His message to the Jewish people. Occasionally God's presence is described in terms of a "burning bush", or God is given the name of "I am".

But Jesus was more direct. He said, "he that have seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14: 9), or "Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me" (John 14: 11). Moreover, to the Jews to whom Christ spoke, he identified himself to be the only path to God, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him" (John 14: 6,7). Encompassing all that there is, Christ is reported to have said, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 21: 6). Christ as the Word of God, is described as encompassing all the "letters" of creation.

For those who chose to believe in him, Christ promised them victory over death, a state of being beyond all needs and desires, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me hath everlasting life." (John 6: 47), or, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (John 6: 35). As the Word of God, Christ is described as immortal, beyond time, and creator of the universe, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not... But as many as received him, to them

gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1: 1-12)

Christ's words as recorded in the New Testament, are remarkably similar to the words of Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita. The unknown sages declare their faith in Atman, the eternal inner principle at work in the heart of all things, unifying all things with Brahman. It was through this unity that they pointed to a state of immortality, of the victory of life over death, of the attainment of eternal peace beyond the transient vagaries of this world. They describe the Atman indirectly, primarily in terms of a state of being which it inspires within their souls. Their declaration of enlightenment is similar to the Old Testament prophets describing their visions and dreams, of going from "darkness to light", from "death to life" (Isaiah 35: 5). There is an ambiguity, probably created through the long distance of time which separates us from the authors of the Upanishads: who or what is the Atman and how does it relate to a figure like Christ?

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna identifies himself both with Brahman and Atman, carrying all the life-giving qualities that they impart. He declares, "For those who take refuge in me and strive to be free from age and death, they know Brahman, they know Atman, and they know what Karma is" (Gita 7: 29), or "I am the soul, prince victorious, which dwells in the heart of all things" (Gita 10: 20). Just like Christ when addressing his disciples, Krishna presents himself to be the sum of the world of creation, the beginning and the end, "All these things have their life in this Life, and I am their beginning and end. In this whole universe there is nothing higher than I. All worlds have their rest in me, as many pearls upon a string" (Gita 7: 7-8), or "I am the beginning and the middle and the end of all things; their seed of eternity, their Treasure Supreme" (Gita 9: 18).

Elsewhere Krishna describes himself as the Inner Light of the souls of men, "In my mercy I dwell in their hearts and I dispel their darkness of ignorance by the light of the lamp of wisdom" (Gita 10: 11). Like Christ, Krishna promises victory over spiritual death, "For this is my word of promise, that he who loves me shall not perish" (Gita 9: 31). Krishna claimed to make the sinful sinless, "He who knows I am beginningless, unborn, the Lord of all the worlds, this mortal is from delusion, and from all evils he is free" (Gita 10: 3). In a way similar to the spiritual insight

imparted by Christ, Krishna declared that only those who have spiritual sight can see him, "See now the whole universe with all things that move and move not, and whatever thy soul may yearn to see. See it all as One in me. But thou never canst see me with these thy mortal eyes: I will give thee divine sight. Behold my wonder and glory" (Gita 11: 7-8).

Krishna mentions various spiritual qualities, such as love for one's enemies (just as Christ does), or steadfastness in "honor or disgrace", but it is the "faith and love" of the devotee which he values the most: "The man whose love is the same for his enemies or his friends, whose soul is the same in honour or disgrace, who is beyond heat or cold or pleasure or pain, who is free from the chains of attachments; ... this man is dear to me. But even dearer to me are those who have faith and love, and who have as me as their End Supreme: those who hear my words of Truth, and who come to the waters of Everlasting Life" (Gita 12: 18-20).

Krishna on several occasions makes it clear that he transcends the worship of different gods, and the love devotees have for the gods is an unconscious worship of him. According to Krishna, worship of the gods alone, is not enough to attain immortality "Even those who in faith worship other gods, because of their love they worship me, although not in the right way. For I accept their sacrifice, and I am their Lord supreme. But they know not my pure Being, and because of this they fall." (Gita 9: 23). Elsewhere, Arjuna addresses Krishna saying, "I have faith in all thy words because these words are words of truth, and neither the gods in heaven nor the demons in hell can grasp thy infinite vastness. Only the Spirit knows thy Spirit: only thou knowest thyself. Source of Being in all beings, God of gods, ruler of all" (Gita 14-15).

Although Krishna identifies himself with Brahman, he also makes a distinction between himself and the Transcendent. Krishna describes himself as the inner principle of the universe which men can approach, a spiritual condition which lives in the souls of pure human beings, which is distinct from the Transcendent. Krishna confirms the unknowable nature of God, the *via negativa* of the Semitic traditions. He presents himself as a mediator between human beings and God, "Who have all the powers of their soul in harmony, and the same loving mind for all; who find joy in the good of all beings - they reach in truth my very self. Yet greater is the

toil of those whose minds are set on the Transcendent, for the path of the Transcendent is hard for mortals to attain. But they for whom I am the End Supreme, who surrender all their works to me, and who with pure love meditate on me and adore me - these I very soon deliver from the ocean of death and life-in-death, because they have set their heart on me. Set heart on me alone and give to me thy understanding: thou shalt in truth live in me hereafter" (Gita 12: 4-5).

Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita gives greater meaning to the Atman and Brahman of the Upanishads. The Atman becomes the Spirit of God, the eternal Self which is periodically incarnate in human form. The Incarnation of God is also presented as the eternal inner Spirit, the inner Sun that shines in the hearts of the pure, "those whose unwisdom is made pure by the wisdom of their inner Spirit, their wisdom is unto them a sun and in its radiance they see the Supreme" (Gita 5: 16). The authors of the Upanishads wrote of their unity with Atman, but Krishna speaks of being the Atman itself. The notion of the Incarnation of God as presented in the Bhagavad Gita, is that it is a perfect reflection of God's presence in the world of creation, a representation of God in a form which is accessible to man. Krishna makes clear that the true Self hidden within the hearts of men, is actually the Spirit of God, which periodically incarnates itself in human form for the purpose of human salvation. This has obvious parallels to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition.

It should also be noted that the theme of 'unity in diversity' is reiterated in the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna states, "In any way that men love me in that same way they find my love: for many are the paths of men, but they all in the end come to me" (Gita 4: 11). To see the unity underlying creation is an act of spiritual enlightenment, just as it is described in the Upanishads. Krishna states, "When a man sees that the infinity of various beings is abiding in the ONE, and is an evolution from the ONE, then he becomes one with Brahman" (Gita 13: 30).

There is much in the Bahá'í writings which correlates with the words of Krishna and the concept of the Incarnation of God as it appears in the Bhagavad Gita. In the Bahá'í writings, the Incarnation of God is referred

to as the 'Manifestation of God'³¹, or as the 'Primal Mirrors'³², or on other occasions as the 'Perfect Man'³³. It has already been mentioned in the context of the Bahá'í approach to reconciling the Immanent and Transcendent traditions. The concept of the Manifestation of God is an integral part of understanding God, and in the Bahá'í writings, it is stated that all references to God that human beings ever make, actually refer to the Manifestations of God, and not to God directly³⁴.

The Manifestation of God from the Bahá'í point of view, is likened to a perfect stainless mirror which reflects the light of God, "God is pure perfection, and creatures are but imperfections. For God to descend into the conditions of existence would be the greatest of imperfections; on the contrary, His manifestation, His appearance, His rising are like the reflection of the sun in a clear, pure, polished mirror. All the creatures are evident signs of God, like the earthly beings upon all of which the rays of the sun shine. But upon the plains, the mountains, the trees and fruits, only a portion of the light shines, through which they become visible, and are reared, and attain to the object of their existence, while the Perfect Man is in the condition of a clear mirror in which the Sun of Reality becomes visible and manifest with all its qualities and perfections"³⁵. This passage expands on the sun-landscape analogy quoted earlier. The Manifestation appears as a perfect stainless mirror on the landscape of creation, and is the Perfect Man. All human beings reflect the image of God, but the Perfect Man is as a spotless, clear mirror, which reflects the Image of God perfectly. All other mirrors appear as dim reflections of the perfect mirror. Just as all mirrors bear greater likeness to the perfect mirror when cleaned of their dross and dust, so the Manifestation of God represents the potential hidden in human nature: "the radiance of these

³¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp 103-104

³² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 48

³³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 113-114

³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp 23-24 and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 147-8

³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 113-114

energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror"³⁶.

True human potential, according to the Bahá'í Faith, is unlocked by the Manifestation of God. The Manifestation of God lies at the core of all things, he is hidden in the inner reality of human beings, and is identical to the Hindu concept of Atman. Bahá'u'lláh's words resemble the words of Christ or Krishna when he states, "O My servants! could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves - a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being. Ye would find yourselves independent of all else but Me, and would perceive, with your inner and outer eye, and as manifest as the revelation of My effulgent Name, the seas of My loving-kindness and bounty moving within you"³⁷. Here, the Manifestation of God is identical to the true Self, and the means by which human beings can realise their true spiritual potential. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh states that human beings can own anything they desire, but the human heart is the sole province where he must reign, "O Son of Dust, all that is in heaven and earth I have ordained for thee, except the human heart, which I have made the habitation of My beauty and glory..."³⁸

From the Bahá'í point of view, knowledge of God is impossible. When we praise God, or refer to God, we are not strictly speaking about God at all. All references to God actually refer to two inseparable phenomena, our true selves, and the Manifestations of God. Knowledge of God is intrinsically related to the impact that the Manifestations have on our inner being, their transforming effect of releasing human potential, and their purifying effect on the mirrors of human hearts. The approach to God in Hinduism is fundamentally the same as the Bahá'í one. The Upanishads present God as the true self, while the Bhagavad Gita largely describes God in terms of an Incarnation of God (Manifestation). Both

³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 65

³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 326-7

³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, from the Persian, no. 27

also express the *via negativa* approach, that God is essentially unknowable.

Taking a Bahá'í view of the Hindu tradition, the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita are complementary in their approach to God and must not be separated from one another. This is particularly true for the Upanishads, for the Bhagavad is more complete than the Upanishads, in that it reiterates many truths already contained in the Upanishads, and stresses the sacred dimension to self-knowledge. But if the Upanishads are taken by themselves, it may appear that God is identical to one's true self and that any human being can reach God by striving for inner unity and self-knowledge. This would contradict God's unknowable nature. Due to the long passage of time which separates us and the authors of the Upanishads, it is difficult for us to know the root of their inspiration. Their enlightenment may well have been rooted in previous Incarnations of Vishnu, for which historical records have been lost. The Hindu concept of God is better understood by taking into account both the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita together, and if this is done, its fundamental agreement with the Bahá'í approach to God and the God of the Semitic line of religions becomes clearer.

4.2 Progressive Revelation

There is another aspect of the Hindu Avatar which finds unity with the Semitic line of religions and the Bahá'í Faith. This is in the concept of the Incarnation of Vishnu being a periodic event through human history. Krishna states, "When righteousness is weak and faints and unrighteousness exults in pride, then my Spirit arises on earth. For the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction of evil in men, for the fulfilment of the kingdom of righteousness, I come to this world in the ages that pass. He who knows my birth as God and who knows my sacrifice, when he leaves his mortal body, goes no more from death to death, for he in truth comes to me." (Gita 4: 7-9).

This passage has many similarities to the Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation and to the continuous line of revelation in the Semitic revelation. In the Quran it is written, "To every people was sent an

Apostle; when their Apostle comes before them, that matter will be judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged" (Quran 10: 47). Also in the New Testament it is written, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Hebrews 1: 1-2).

In the Bahá'í writings it is stated, "In the Kingdoms of earth and heaven there must needs be manifested a Being, an Essence Who shall act as a Manifestation and Vehicle for the transmission of the grace of the Divinity Itself, the Sovereign Lord of all. Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed. It is for this very purpose that in every age and dispensation the Prophets of God and His chosen Ones have appeared amongst men, and have evinced such power as is born of God and such might as only the Eternal can reveal"³⁹.

The Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation generalises the concept of the Avatar to be a phenomenon which has occurred within every major spiritual tradition of the world. In the Semitic line of religions, Avatars are referred to as prophets, but from the Bahá'í perspective, the terms Avatar or Prophet refer to the same phenomenon.

Within the spiritual heritage of India, it is generally agreed amongst Hindus that there have been nine Avatars so far. The first eight have already been mentioned, Rama being the seventh and Krishna being the eighth. Many Hindus have come to accept Buddha as the ninth Avatar. The 9th century AD Hindu revival due to Shankara, from which the Advaita Vedanta school arose, was very much linked to the influence of Buddhism on Hinduism. Many of the characteristic Vedanta themes, such as going beyond dualism to monism, although implicitly there in Hindu scriptures, were given a new lease of life through the teachings of the Buddha. The tenth Avatar, the Kalki Avatar, is usually cited by Hindus to be the future Avatar to come. Hindus should therefore be open to investigating Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the fulfilment of all the world's

³⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 67

spiritual traditions, which in Hinduism, translates to being the Kalki Avatar⁴⁰.

Hinduism has also been influenced by the Semitic religions. From the 15th to 17th centuries AD, the impact of Islam in northern India inspired the rise of Sikhism. More recently, the 19th century Ramakrishna Mission derived much of its impetus from the interaction of the Hindu tradition with Christianity.

5. Unity in Diversity

As with the Semitic religions, Hinduism employs many symbols to convey its spiritual message. The citations from the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita already quoted show that the Hindu concept of God's unknowable nature is in complete agreement with the descriptions of God in the Semitic line of religions. No symbol can adequately capture the nature of God, no form can represent the formless. The best approach to understanding God is to state what God is not, 'Not this, Not that' (Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 4: 5: 15) - the *via negativa*. The symbols that describe God, are actually descriptions of human spirituality, a reflection of ourselves, and do not directly relate to God. Because the concept of God is irreducibly subjective, that is, it involves us discovering our true selves, unlocking our true potential, there will be as many descriptions of God as there are people - and they are all equally wrong, and equally correct. This principle is well recognised within the spiritual tradition of India⁴¹.

There will also inevitably be a cultural dimension to this kind of metaphysical relativism. In general, God is described in the Semitic line of religions with many metaphors which derive from the act of speaking, such as the "breath of the Holy Spirit", or the "Word of God", "Alpha and Omega of creation" and so on. In the stories of the Old Testament, God speaks to his people, and it is His Voice, His holy command that is His identifying mark. These portrayals of God are of course, inevitably

⁴⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p 95

⁴¹ Prabhananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, pp 34-5

anthropomorphic, giving a human form to the formless. God is described by many attributes, such as wisdom, knowledge, justice and is given many titles like the Creator, Fashioner, or Provider. In Islam, these attributes of God are called Names of God (Quran 20: 8). The Names of God are also frequently mentioned in the Bahá'í writings.

Similar representations of God also exist within Hinduism. The god Ganesha symbolises the holy word OM. In general, different deities personify different names and attributes of God. One of the designations of Shiva is that of Destroyer, and together with his consort Kali, they make up something comparable to the Wrath of God in the Old Testament. Another personification of Shiva's consort is Shakti, whose name literally means "energy", and her action in the world is something akin to how the "Breath" of the Christian "Holy Spirit" animates and sustains the world. The god Brahman has the function of being Creator, while his consort Saraswati symbolises Knowledge. Vishnu most popularly portrays God as the Preserver, while his consort Lakshmi, symbolises Wealth. The gods and goddesses symbolise the names and attributes of the Brahman of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. From this perspective, the description of a god having a consort or a family, is only a figurative expression, and should not be taken literally.

There may be some Hindus who emphasise the literal meaning of the symbols, and who conceive of the many gods of Hinduism as having a reality of their own. But by the same token, many religious people of the Semitic religious tradition are also literal about their symbols of God. This does not invalidate the spiritual meaning behind the symbol.

There is also another dimension to the symbols of God in Hinduism. In general, the Hindu representation of God's attributes is more visual than in the Semitic line of religions. The dark skin of Shiva, the snake around his neck, the tiger skin as his cape, symbolise his power of destruction. His third eye denotes inner vision. Often Shiva is depicted as a dancer, where one of his four hands beats a drum, sounding out the rhythm of creation. The dark blue colour of Vishnu symbolises infinite space. He stands in an upright pose, in a pillar-like stance, depicting his role of sustainer of the worlds. In his four hands, the conch shell stands for Vishnu as the origin of the universe, the discus represents the cosmic

mind, the mace symbolises renovation, and the lotus denotes purity in the midst of evil. The bended trunk of the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha, symbolises his ability to remove obstacles. He is worshipped at the beginning of any endeavour. These visual forms have many levels of different meanings and vary from region to region, and are spiritual symbols to the enlightened Hindu. They represent the formless Brahman in forms which the human mind can conceive, and are rather like the names and attributes of the unitary invisible Godhead of the Semitic religions.

The personal character of Hindu religious symbols means that in comparison to the Semitic religions, it is less theological, less canonical about its beliefs. Hindus are much more autonomous in their religious practice, much more concerned about verifying spiritual truths through their own personal experience, than formulating a common creed or engaging in theology. That this freedom is generally shared by most Hindus is reflected in the Doctrine of Chosen Deity ⁴², the widely practised principle that each Hindu is free to worship whichever god he or she wishes. In fact, it is not uncommon for Hindus to include Muslim and Christian prayers in their liturgy.

The call for unity in Hinduism is an ancient one, and has been periodically reiterated throughout its long History. In the Rig Veda, it is said that the "wise speak of what is ONE in many ways" (Rig Veda I: 164: 46), The Katha Upanishads state that, "there are not many but only ONE. Who sees variety and not unity wanders from death to death" (Katha Upanishad Part 4: 10). In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna declares that, "In any way that men love me in that same way they find my love: for many are the paths of men, but they all in the end come to me" (Gita 4: 11). The search for unity is embedded deep into the psyche of Hinduism.

It is not surprising that modern Hindu movements have made unity their chief goal. Take for instance, the Ramakrishna movement, founded on the teachings of the 19th century sage Ramakrishna. The core teaching of the Ramakrishna movement is that all religions are one. In the words of Ramakrishna, "So many religions, so many paths to reach the same

⁴² see J.P.Suda, *Religions in India, a Study in their Essential Unity*, p 50

goal... I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths" ⁴³. On another occasion Ramakrishna likens the different religions in the world to the different names that each culture gives to water, although the names sound different, they refer to the same liquid, "The tank has several *ghats*. At one Hindus draw water and call it *jal*, at another Mohammedans draw water and call it *pani*; at a third Christians draw the same liquid and call it *water*. The substance is one though the name differs, and everyone is seeking the same thing. Every religion of the world is one such *ghat*. Go with a sincere and earnest heart by any of these *ghats* and you will reach the water of eternal bliss. But do not say that your religion is better than that of another" ⁴⁴.

These words are very similar to the message of religious unity as expressed in the Bahá'í writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá for instance, describes religious unity in the following way, "Light is good in whatsoever lamp it is burning! A rose is beautiful in whatsoever garden it may bloom! A star has the same radiance if it shines from the East or from the West. Be free from prejudice, so you will love the Sun of Truth from whatsoever point in the horizon it may arise! You will realize that if the Divine light of truth shone in Jesus Christ it also shone in Moses and in Buddha. The earnest seeker will arrive at this truth. This is what is meant by the Search after Truth" ⁴⁵.

Ramakrishna's teachings were developed and spread by his disciple Vivekananda. Just before the turn of this century, Vivekananda toured the West, and is responsible for greatly increasing knowledge about Hinduism there. In most of his Western talks, Vivekananda promoted the goal of religious unity and the principle of unity in diversity. In his address at the World's Parliament of Religions congress, in Chicago on 11th September 1893, Vivekananda stated that, "Unity in variety is the plan of nature, and the Hindu has recognised it" ⁴⁶. He went on to describe religious unity by

⁴³ quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 341

⁴⁴ quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 341

⁴⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 137

⁴⁶ Vivekananda, *The complete works of Swami Vivekananda*, volume 1, p 15

paraphrasing the words of Krishna, "It is the same light coming through different colours. And these little variations are necessary for the purposes of adaptation. But in the heart of everything the same truth reigns. The Lord has declared to the Hindu in His incarnation as Krishna, "I am in every religion as the thread through a string of pearls. Wherever thou seest extraordinary holiness and extraordinary power raising and purifying humanity, know that I am there"...."⁴⁷. Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita states, "In the whole vast universe there is nothing higher than I. All the worlds have their rest in me, as many pearls upon a string" (Gita 7:7). Clearly Vivekananda draws the natural conclusion implied in Krishna's words that the thread which unites together all things in the universe, must also bind together different religious revelations.

The title of Vivekananda's talk delivered in London on 3rd November 1896 was 'Unity in Diversity'⁴⁸. This is significant from the Bahá'í perspective, since Shoghi Effendi in 1931 wrote that the "watchword" of the Bahá'í Faith was "unity in diversity"⁴⁹. It would appear that 'unity in diversity' is the touchstone principle of both the Bahá'í Faith and Hinduism.

Another interesting feature of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda school of Hinduism is that it sees revelation as a never-ending continuous process, with no beginning, without end. This gives rise to an openness towards all spiritual traditions, which today, is rarely associated with religion. Vivekananda states that, "I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of everyone. Not only shall I do these but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future. Is God's book finished? Or is it still a

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p 16

⁴⁸ Vivekananda, *Complete works of Vivekananda*, volume II, pp 175-188

⁴⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 42

continuous revelation, going on? It is a marvellous book – these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so-many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave it open for all of them. We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future”⁵⁰. These words echo the following words of Bahá'u'lláh, “This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future”⁵¹, or “consort with all religions with amity and concord”⁵². Both the Bahá'í Faith and Hinduism understand revelation to be a universal dynamic phenomenon, which means that they share a spirit of openness towards accepting other spiritual traditions.

Hinduism is increasingly being offered as a possible model for religious unity by both Hindus and non-Hindus⁵³. The relatively peaceful coexistence over many centuries amongst different religious communities on the Indian subcontinent is often traced to the Hindu concept of unity in diversity. This is in contrast to many other places in the world, where fanaticism and dogmatism are fuelled by religious ideologies based upon superiority or exclusion. At the end of his book on the Spiritual Heritage of India, the writer Swami Prabhananda concludes his survey of Indian spiritual history by suggesting that Hinduism may well play a future role in bringing together the world's spiritual traditions:

“It is perhaps natural in closing this book to emphasize strongly the age-old effort of India to reconcile differing faiths. For it is probably by continuing this effort on an international scale that she is doing most to advance the spiritual welfare of mankind. To bring together against rampant evil the great religions of the world is no doubt a gigantic task, but it is one for which India has the

⁵⁰ Vivekananda, *Complete works of Vivekananda*, volume II, p 372

⁵¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p136

⁵² Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-I-Aqdas*, p72

⁵³ see *Modern Indian responses to religious pluralism*, edited by Harold G. Coward

special qualification that she strives for unity, not by calling for a common doctrine, but only pointing to a common goal, and by exhorting men to its attainment. The path, she assures us, matters little; it is the goal that is supreme. And what is the goal? It is only - once again - to realize God”⁵⁴

Since the unity of the world's religious traditions is precisely one of the central goals of the Bahá'í Faith, the Hindu experience and its present day concerns is more than of passing interest to Bahá'ís. The Hindu sacred scriptures do not however, make many references to religious traditions outside the Indian subcontinent. By making use of the Bahá'í writings, the Hindu search for unity would be significantly widened. On the other hand, for Bahá'ís, in their effort at “restating the fundamentals” of each Faith, to “reconcile their aims”, to “reinvigorate their life”, to “demonstrate their oneness”, to “restore the pristine purity of their teachings” and to “assist in the realization of their highest aspirations”⁵⁵, they will find a kindred spirit within Hinduism.

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⁵⁴ quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 356

⁵⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 114-116

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The Revivification of the Buddha's Dharma

Jamshed K. Fozdar

Abstract

The thesis deals briefly with the Buddha's Dharma (Religion), its unrivaled impact upon the spiritual canvas of Asia, the fundamental motivation of its Founder, its flowering "springtime", its "summer" heat and its present "winter", and most importantly the portents for its revivification and the return to its pristine glory through the only possible process – a recurrence of the "Buddha-rising" – the advent once again of the Divine Teacher – in this instance, the Buddha Maitrya-Amitabha.

Introduction

The Founder of Buddhism, Siddharta Gautama, who lived in India around 563 B.C. and died in his eightieth year, is one of history's greatest leaders of mankind. He ranks among the handful of men who founded the other great Religions and his influence for the good for over two millennia upon the conduct of the greater part of Asia's humanity is unsurpassed.

While the real achievement of the Buddha consists of the rejuvenating effect His teaching exerted in purifying human society in the India of His time and extricating it from the morass of idol worship and animal slaughter into which the Hindu masses had become entangled, and which to the common man constituted the gamut of what he conceived to be "religion" – yet His Dharma of spiritual salvation, like those of the other great Faiths, also had its temporal fruit, which for centuries after the Buddha's passing provided a humane praxis of life for those then fortunate enough to have taken shelter under its mighty tree.

ESSENCE

The sense of universality which the Buddha imparted to the power of the eternal Dharma, as we see in this most poignant passage on that greatest of all ingredients "love" – for creating and sustaining any human relationship – has never been surpassed in the beauty and breadth of its meaning since the time it was first enunciated by Him over twenty five centuries ago. *"Just as with her own life a mother shields from hurt her own, her only child, let all-embracing thoughts for all that live be thine – an all-embracing love for all the universe, in all its heights and depths and breadth, unstinted love, unmarred by hate within, not rousing enmity."*¹ And the virtuous life: *"Get up (rouse yourself), do not be thoughtless. Follow the law of virtue. He who practices virtue lives happily in this world as well as in the world beyond. Follow the law of virtue do not follow the law of sin. He who practices virtue lives happily in this world as well as in the world beyond."*²

The Buddha often compared Himself to the beautiful lotus blossom that grows from the world and stands above it.

*"Just as a blue, red or white lotus, although born in the water, grown up in the water, when it reaches the surface stands there unsoiled by the water – just so, Brahmin, although born in the world, grown up in the world, having overcome the world, I abide unsoiled in the world. Take it that I am Buddha, Brahmin."*³ and this example is also given of themselves by the Buddha's predecessors – the Avatars of Hinduism – Ram and Krishna and is equally applicable for describing every Divine Teacher, be He Moses, Muhammad, Christ, Baha'u'llah, Zoroaster and others. And, as He proclaimed, Buddhahood is a station no "worldling" can attain or fully understand. *"Not only by disciplined conduct and vows, not only by much learning, nor moreover by the attainment of meditative calm nor by sleeping solitary, do I reach the happiness of*

¹ Suttanipata, vv. 149-150.

² Dhammapada, vv. 168, 169.

³ Anguttara-nikaya, 11.37-39. Also Dhammapada, 58, 59.

release which no worldling can attain. O mendicant, do not be confident so long as you have not reached the extinction of impurities."⁴

The divinity of the Buddha is also unequivocally asserted in the Mahapadana-Suttanta. And for those who think it is easy to invent true Religion, the Buddha denounces as vile heresy the view that His Dharma is something thought out by Himself and warns one of His apostles Sariputta and others through him to not categorize Him as merely another wise man who preaches a path of salvation, devised through trial and error.

*"Whoever, Sariputta, knowing that it is so of me, seeing that it is so, should speak thus: 'There are no states of further-men, no excellent cognition and insight befitting the Ariyans in the recluse Gotama; the recluse Gotama teaches Dhamma on (a system of) his own devising beaten out by reasoning and based on investigation.' If he does not retract that speech, Sariputta, if he does not retract that thought, if he does not cast out that view, he is verily consigned to Niraya Hell according to his deserts. Even if he were a monk, Sariputta, endowed with moral habit, concentration and wisdom who should here and now arrive at gnosis, I (still) say that this results thus: If he does not retract that speech and that thought, if he does not cast out that view, he is verily consigned to Niraya Hell according to his deserts."*⁵

No matter what heights of spirituality or knowledge a disciple may attain, if he misjudges this all-important aspect of the phenomenon of Buddhahood (Avatar), then he is verily consigned to Niraya Hell. Not only does the Buddha claim here that His own state is beyond man (further-men) but also that the Dharma itself has no relationship to any system derived by human logic or investigation, once again confirming that this unique phenomenon of the Manifestation (Avatar), the Buddha and His Message (the Dharma), is from the realm of the wholly beyond – an exaltation from the Absolute.

The correct perspective from which to view the Buddha and His doctrine would be, according to His own words, as one of the fully enlightened

⁴ Dhammapada, vv. 150, 151.

⁵ Majjhima-nikaya, I.68, 71-72.

Beings – continuously manifesting Themselves for the guidance and salvation of humanity – the fully omniscient Teachers of mankind.

*“Do not call the Tathagata by His name nor address Him as ‘friend’, for He is the Buddha, the Holy One. The Buddha looks with a kind heart equally on all beings, and they therefore call Him ‘Father’. To disrespect a father is wrong; to despise him is wicked.”*⁶

We are cautioned from falling into the trap of relating Him to any objective reality. The lesser can never truly define or understand the greater, and it is futile to think of the Buddha in terms of man-conceived dimensions or attributes. The Tathagata (Buddha) cannot be grasped. He leaves no trace by which He can be tracked. All that can be said is that “He is”, and it is idle to pursue and define His Reality in spatio-temporal terms: *“Since a Tathagata, even when actually present, is incomprehensible, it is inept to call him – the Uttermost Person, the Supernal Person, the Attainer of the Supernal – that after dying the Tathagata is, or is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not.”*⁷

ACHIEVEMENTS

The Buddha’s Teaching of salvation and love, like the Religions of the other great Divine Teachers, also established a mighty but humane civilization with its own temporal organs and artistic grandeur, first within His own native land and then in most of the lands of Asia, bestowing a sense of morality in life where there had been none and a wider view of humanity to those who had reached the stage of nationhood, eventually bringing within the pale of its influence a fifth of the human race.

Spiritual “Springtime”...

Contemporary records of those times tell us that during the Buddha’s lifetime His Faith spread to the Indo-Gangetic plain. It took another three

⁶ Mahavagga, I.6

⁷ Samyutta-nikaya, 111.118

centuries to reach Ceylon (Sri Lanka), which was the exception in being opened to the Buddha's Dharma (Teachings) this early in its history. From Ceylon the Dharma spread to Burma seven centuries later and it would be another three centuries before it would reach Thailand and Cambodia and later to Indonesia. Buddhist missionaries also from Ceylon entered China a thousand years after the Buddha's passing and then Korea and Japan soon after.

We are fortunate in having accounts of those temporal achievements of the Buddha's Dharma in the land of His birth, left to us in the narratives of various Chinese monks and Greek dignitaries who travelled to the courts of some of the great Indian monarchs who had espoused the Buddha's Gospel. And those records, related briefly, will serve to give us some idea of how great and dynamic was the pure Path in those times and what it has now become – obscure and unfrequented, lost and awaiting a "Buddha-rising" to restore it once again to its former glory.

... and its "Summer Heat"

First, let us begin with Asoka (274 - 232 B.C.), foremost among the monarchs who espoused the Buddha's teachings and spread them across the length and breadth of India as well as such foreign countries as Ceylon, Greece, Egypt, Persia and Rome. This same Asoka, who had slaughtered tens of thousands in his thirst for empire, after acknowledging his allegiance to the Buddha became a being transformed. History shows no equal among kings or commoners to match Asoka's missionary success and moral stature, and we must constantly bear in mind that this was over two millennia ago. The influence his missions exerted is one of the greatest civilizing factors in the world's history. They were established in lands where the inhabitants were, for the most part, savage and superstitious, and spiritualized them. They became great centers of commerce and learning where once they were wild and savage. His edicts like a string through pearls, established a common system of values both humane and just. All this great flowering of culture occurred over two thousand years ago, and today in our times, despite the tremendous changes that have come upon those regions through military conquests, natural disasters and the impact of other great ideologies, the proof of the heights of civilisation that they reached and the humane progress that was

achieved by the power of the pure Dharma are still evident from the structures of great edifices and social patterns among the populace of those lands. And we can gauge the tremendous sway the Buddha's teachings held over the heart and mind of this great conqueror from the edicts which Asoka had carved in rock to announce to all his subjects the lessons of the Dharma: "Devanampriya (beloved of the gods) desires towards all beings: abstention from hurting, restraint in behaviour, and treatment equal with one's self and softness. And this conquest is considered the principal one by Devampriya, viz, the conquest by morality. And this (conquest) has been won repeatedly by Devanampriya, both here and among all beyond the borders. This conquest, which has been won by this everywhere, a conquest (won) everywhere (and) repeatedly, causes the feeling of satisfaction."⁸

And it was this same Asoka who, prior to his conversion to Buddhism, lived in the lap of grandeur unrivaled by Susa in all its glory or the magnificence of Ecbatana, (capital of Alexander the Great), who so changed his rule from destruction to construction, from death to life, that Greek chroniclers of his empire record that famines and wars were almost unknown. Irrigation received special attention – the greater part of the country was under irrigation and bore two crops a year. Artificial lakes and dams were constructed wherever feasible, trade flourished, and a cosmopolitan crowd of merchants from various parts of Africa, Greece and Asia could be seen in the bazaars of Asoka's capital of Pataliputra. Goods from Southern India, the Golden Chersonese, China, Mesopotamia and the Greek cities of Asia Minor were displayed in the stalls, and like everything else in the Empire, their sale was strictly regulated and controlled. Silks, muslins, the finer sorts of cloth, cutlery and armour, brocades, embroideries and rugs, perfumes and drugs, ivory and ivory work, jewellery and gold (seldom silver) these were the main articles in which the merchants of his empire dealt. Accounts of this wealth were related by Persian travellers who visited his empire. The Artha-Sastra (codex of Commerce) gives elaborate shipping regulations, and there was considerable coastal trade – Indian merchant vessels crossed the Indian Ocean to the mouth of the Tigris and to Aden. In their trade compacts and social relationships too, the subjects of Asoka were not lacking in

⁸ Asoka's Rock Edict, No. XIII, Shahbazarhi and Girnar.

excellence. Truthfulness was the predominant Indian characteristic of those times, and this is confirmed by Greek travellers: "No Indian has ever been convicted of lying." In signing contracts, witnesses and seals were considered to be superfluous, and houses were left unguarded. The women were well treated, and wives had their dowries as their private property. A husband could be punished for cruelty, and offences against women were severely dealt with. Slavery was unknown.

After Asoka's conversion to Buddhism by his barber Upagupta of Mathura a low caste, he foreswore war and governed in the light of the law only – the Dharma or the Law of Piety laid down by the Buddha: The reverberations of the war-drums became the reverberation of the drum of the Law – the only true victory is that effected by the Law of Piety – and he earnestly adjured his sons and grandsons to bear in mind, if ever they would be tempted by the lust for empire, the worthlessness of conquest by force. The conquest of the Law, he assured them, is alone a conquest full of delight. As time went on, Asoka became more and more religious. He had entered the Buddhist order as a lay brother; he now became a monk and determined to use the Civil Service inaugurated by his grandfather (Chandragupta Maurya) to propagate the Law throughout his dominions. "Everywhere in my dominions my (officers)... shall tour for the following instruction in morality as well as for other business. Meritorious is obedience to mother and father. Meritorious is liberality to friends, acquaintances and relatives and to the Brahmanas and Sramanas. Meritorious is abstention from the slaughter of living beings. Meritorious is to spend little and store little."⁹

In order that the people might clearly understand what was expected of them, edicts were engraved on rocks or pillars set up in places where they were most likely to attract the attention of the passerby. These were erected at places as far apart as Peshawar, Kathiawar, the Nepal frontier, Orissa and Mysore – "the Law, wherever pillars of stone or tables of stone exist, must be recorded, so that it may long endure." The Law, as enjoined by Asoka, was strictly practical and suited to the popular understanding. No mention is made of metaphysical subtleties. It consists of compassion, liberality, truth, purity, gentleness and saintliness

⁹ Asoka's Rock Edict, No. III, Girnar.

of life, "hearkening to elders, reverence to the aged, and seemly treatment of Brahmins and ascetics, of the poor and wretched, yea, even servants."¹⁰ These virtues said Asoka's dictums will bring the only true happiness, in this world and the next. Asoka's first thought was for the comfort and well-being of his subjects. On the main roads, shade-trees were planted, wells dug, and hospitals erected for men and animals. Education, as in most Buddhist countries, was widely disseminated by the monasteries, otherwise the edicts would have been of little avail.

Jails were thrown open on the anniversary of the Emperor's coronation. Prisoners under sentence of death were given a respite in which they could lodge an appeal and were visited by pious men who would prepare their souls. Governors were given wide latitude in granting pardons. One of Asoka's chief reforms was to carry into practice the Buddha's law of ahimsa (non-violence), kindness to all living things. He gradually and progressively stopped the slaughter of animals, setting the example himself. The royal hunt was abolished, killing for the royal kitchens was cut down, animal sacrifices were forbidden, and a closed season was introduced for various beasts and birds.

One of the Emperor's chief concerns was to introduce complete religious tolerance. There were to be no wars of religion in his empire. He warned his people of the evils of schism and deprecated the habit of exalting one's own views at the expenses of others. Though a convinced Buddhist, he extended his patronage to Brahmins, Jains and other sects with complete impartiality. A characteristic action was the construction of the costly caves at Barabar for the naked ascetics of the Ajivika sect founded by Gosala, the rival of Mahavira. Asoka proclaimed, that, "The growth of the essentials (of Dharma) is possible in many ways. But its root lies in restraint in regard to speech, which means that there would be no extolment of one's own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions and that it should be moderate in every case, even on appropriate occasions. On the contrary, other sects should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions. If a person acts in this way, he not only promotes his own sect but also benefits other sects. But if a

¹⁰ Asoka's Rock Edict, No. XII, Girnar.

person acts otherwise, he not only injures his own sect but also harms other sects."¹¹

Asoka and then after him his son Mahinda who took the Dharma to Ceylon, were followed by a line of worthy successors. Among them Kanishka, Harsha and others. All shining products of the Buddha's Dharma.

The Dharma's "Winter"

It is only too obvious that the Noble Eight fold Path which had purified a major portion of the human race in the past, is now too overlain with the brambles of superstitious rites, narrow allegiances, hatreds and greed – all products of ignorance regarding the Dharma's real aim. Only a Buddha can now renew the eternal Dharma and, utterly purified, offer it once again to humanity as the sure path to salvation. Only a Buddha can again imbue the Dharma with its ancient potency and enlarge its scope to make it a haven of hope and motivation to one and all, regardless of colour, caste or creed. Covered up with man-made accretions, superstitions and rituals the Dharma has been converted into a preserve of the elite and their instrument for personal gain and no longer what the Buddha intended it to be, free as the air for all to breathe as their birth right: "*The Dharmma has been taught by me without making a distinction between esoteric and exoteric. For Buddhas have not the closed fist of a teacher in respect of mental states.*"¹²

... and Eclipse

As is only too evident, the Reality of the Buddha-Dharma has long since ceased to play any part in our lives and has instead been substituted by meaningless practices and superstitious rites before statues of mud, stone, silver and gold produced by the hand of man mostly for commercial purposes – the very practices that the Buddha emphatically forbade: "*Rituals have no efficacy; prayers are vain repetitions and incantations have no saving power. But to abandon covetousness and best to become*

¹¹ Asoka's Rock Edict, No. XII, Girnar.

¹² Digha-nikaya, II.100

free from evil passions, and to give up all hatred and ill will, that is the right sacrifice and the true worship."¹³

While empty chantings and yellow robes linger on, the spirit is no more. The Dharma is no longer able to motivate the rhythm of our hearts or the vibration of our minds. We have, most of us, totally disobeyed the Buddha. How then can one expect to be enlightened despite such flagrant disobedience? The pure Dharma is no longer a living force in our behaviour towards our fellow beings, instead it exists only as some passive formula in the lifeless pages of books, or in temples of cold stone. Hardly one among ten thousand gives mind to the admonitions of the Buddha and cares to know His purpose for us. Even fewer bother to endeavour to tread the Noble Eight-fold Path, which is a way of living – not a way of outward appearances and empty talk – to forge us into impregnable barriers against the insidious inroads of moral decay.

Flickering embers still testify to its past glory

Despite the multitude of different concepts about the Buddha's Teaching that we find proliferating today, championed by the various schools of Buddhist thought, yet a few aspects of His Dharma are still nominally subscribed to by all Buddhists. Principally, they concern the fundamentals of a pure life as laid down in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight-Fold Path. The Four Noble Truths are: Duhkha (sorrow), Samudaya (the cause of Sorrow), Nirodha (the removal of Sorrow) and Marga (the way leading to it). The Noble Eight-Fold Path sums up the Buddha's Doctrine on how to attain Nirvana (salvation). The first two stages deal with the correct attitude: Right View and Right Aspiration. The next three state the moral and social requirements to be met: Right Speech, Right Conduct and Right Means of Livelihood; and the last three concern the mental and spiritual disciplines necessary; Right Endeavour, Right Mindfulness, and Right Contemplation.

Despite the utter simplicity of these fundamental precepts of the Buddha's doctrine, the average person finds it easier, on the whole, to worship his so-called "gods" than to practice these precepts in everyday life. Hence

¹³ Milindapanha, p. 111. Also, Dhammapada, vv. 19, 20.

the Buddha constantly reminded His followers that the Dharma is to be an act of living the life, a carrying out of one's duties towards one's fellow creatures, and not mere chanting of supplications. To enable His followers to be on guard against straying from the protection of His system, it is said that He asked them to constantly remind themselves of their Faith and their obligations by bringing to mind the three Jewels.¹⁴

To the Buddha for refuge I go.

To the Dharma for refuge I go.

To the Samgha for refuge I go.

For the second time to the Buddha for refuge I go.

For the second time to the Dharma for refuge I go.

For the second time to the Samgha for refuge I go.

For the third time to the Buddha for refuge I go.

For the third time to the Dharma for refuge I go.

For the third time to the Samgha for refuge I go.

In slightly altered form it is the creed for all the great Faiths. Here, it simply depicts a universally accepted phenomenon in Religion – the Divine Manifestation, the Buddha – finding and proclaiming once again the eternal Dharma and entrusting it to the care of the Samgha to nurture it and tend it to grow in order to make it into a safe refuge for the humanity of that time.

Every Religion worth the name begins with a burst of spiritual enlightenment like the dawn lighting up the night sky. In time it achieves its noonday brilliance and then finally its setting, and the night of the spirit follows to await yet another Avatar, a new Buddha-rising to bring forth a new awakening, new hope. The original direct contact and living belief in every Religion gives way to indirect and loose contact through intermediaries (monks, priests, etc.), themselves far removed from the Source. The living faith, born of dynamic inquiry is replaced by complacency and institutionalized vested interests which guarantee salvation by ritualistic performances, such as bathing in a holy river, or making an offering at a famous temple, or worshipping a tooth or tree. Tourists travel the paths once taken by the devout pilgrims and the holy

¹⁴ Buddhist catena

places become market places for adventurers who prey upon the unwary and superstitious. The disinclination of the masses to give up the easy life plays into the hands of those self-appointed guardians (the bhikus, sannyasins, acharyas, etc.) of man's soul, who further their own ambitions for power and pelf, and who survive and fatten only by feeding on their hapless victim – imprisoning the psyche and strangling the spiritual within man – until at last, the Divine Sun appears once more to dispel the spiritual darkness and its night-creatures and permits the soul of man to again breathe free. This is the story of man and His Religion. One without the other does not exist. And so it is for all of us, even more so now as we survey our own situation, within whichever Faith we have placed our allegiance.

Having completely profaned the Dharma's precepts in every conceivable manner through our acts towards our fellow beings, we try to assuage both the Buddha and Mara (the Evil One) by periodically offering sacrifices of some worthless trinket while all the time aware that the true sacrifice for achieving Nirvana (spiritual liberation) does not consist of some material trifle or some rites to be performed only at fixed seasons, but, is an incessant operation every moment of our life where every function down to our very breathing is laid on the altar of purity. To recognize the magnitude of our present predicament we have only to ask ourselves - what if anything, remains of that Triple Refuge (The Three Jewels) – the Buddha, the Dharma and the Samgha*? Yes, and the Samgha?

How goes it with the Samgha? What has the Samgha become today? It is, indeed, remarkable how closely interwoven the monastic community was with the life of the clans in Magadha in the first centuries of Buddhist history. The assemblage of monks composing the Samgha was a simple and natural instrument created by the Buddha in the India of that time to serve, by virtue of their special devotion, sacrifice and diligence, as the elder brothers to the lay community. The Samgha's mission was to emphasize for their own advancement of spirit and for the weal of the laity the concentrations and actions prescribed by the Dharma to attain Nirvana. Unfortunately, the five simple commandments of the Buddha –

* (clergy)

1. *Abstention from taking lives on all occasions*
2. *Abstention from covetousness*
3. *Abstention from false speech*
4. *Abstention from intoxicants*
5. *Abstention from going wrong about sensuous pleasures*¹⁵

– are no longer the code by which the Samgha, not to mention the lay Buddhists, conduct their lives. This, despite the Buddha's explicit warning: "... *O mendicant, be not negligent. Let not your thought delight in sensual pleasures, ... that you may not cry out when burning. 'This is suffering!'*"¹⁶

The Samgha, the promulgator and guardian of the Dharma, in times long past, is now riven with division and intrigue and has itself become the major contributory factor in accelerating the Dharma's decay and its present tragic plight.

Instead of transcending national boundaries and promulgating the universal message of love and compassion entrusted to it by the Buddha, the Samgha has in most if not all Buddhist countries subordinated the interests of humanity to national goals and narrow ambitions of national leaders, clearly involving itself in the course of empire and conflict, similar to the acts of the clergy of the other Faiths, but, totally against every principle of the Buddha's Dharma. By such ways has the Samgha lost the allegiance of the common man as well as the respect of the rulers who see it as weak, opportunistic and unprincipled, too preoccupied with holding on to its declining influence over the superstitious by its all too blatant attempts at magic and miracles, wholly against the Buddha's admonition: "*I forbid you, O bikkus to employ any spells or supplications, for they are useless since the law of Karma governs all things. He who attempts to perform miracles has not understood the doctrine of the Tathagata (Buddha).*"¹⁷

¹⁵ Sthananga-Sutra, p. 266

¹⁶ Dhammapada, v. 371

¹⁷ Mahaparinibbana Sutta.

The Buddha, more than all others and like His peers, the Avatars (Divine Messengers), saw only too well that the tricks of magicians, and manipulation of physical phenomena cannot in the end have any lasting effect on the real purpose of His mission – the salvation of humanity, the restoring of faith and virtue within the human heart – since that could only be achieved through Love, Truth, Justice and living the life. This transformation of human nature effected by the Buddha and the Founders of other world religions, is clearly the greatest miracle of man's history, for it is the true cause of the flowering of great civilizations, before which a jump from the earth to the moon, the cure for cancer, heart transplants, etc., pale into insignificance and without which none of those could ever have seen the light of day.

REQUIREMENT FOR REVIVIFICATION

For the Dharma to once again become relevant to the needs of our world, it is clear that its message will have to be renewed to address the entire human race, since humanity now stands in need of not merely a reiteration of the Dharma's high and noble principles, but – far more urgent – its dynamic participation in providing both direction and example for overcoming the real problems which plague society in these most perilous of times. Lifting mankind from the depths of despair and anguish to the dawn of a new day of joy is the only task now worthy of the Dharma's mettle if it is to successfully meet this challenge and fan anew the dying embers of faith in the breast of a desperate and cynical humanity into a blazing fire, which will evaporate the frigidity of aloofness and hostility and forge its allegiance into an invincible host, capable of making this earth into a paradise.

But in order to achieve this all-important goal of re-establishing the Dharma on to its former pedestal of life-bestowing potency for humanity, it is first necessary to restore humanity's faith in that process of salvation unequivocally proclaimed by the Buddha and all the other Divine Teachers – the unfailing Law of Progressive Revelation.

"The Buddhas who have been and who shall be;

Of these am I and what they did I do ..."¹⁸ And: "All the Buddhas are exactly the same as regards Buddha-dhammas."¹⁹

A continuity of Religions is clearly asserted here by the Buddha, Who also affirms that these periodic Spiritual Sunrises are identical in their essence. However, while the essence of the Dharma is eternal in the realm of its own Reality, yet its appearance and operation in this phenomenal world is subject to the unvarying law of change. Nothing in the phenomenal world is eternal. Even the glory of the Dharma, is finally obscured from humanity as we stray farther and farther away from its truth, by our greed and wrong-doing. Thus, lost to the eyes of mankind, the pure Dharma awaits the advent of yet another Buddha – Maitrya – to unearth it and, Who, after once more sweeping it clean of men's fancies and corrupting machinations, must restore it to its pristine purity, its ancient glory, to serve as a shining beacon, so that humanity's storm-tossed ship, may find again its safe haven.

*"That, verily, is a safe haven, that is the best haven; after having got to that haven a man is delivered from all pains."*²⁰

A continuity of Religions – each joined to the other in progressive succession and thus explaining the need for renewal as well as the reason for their successive obsolescence – is an immutable spiritual law. No earnest and open-minded follower of the Buddha can any longer deny that magnificent Wats and Temples and statues of clay and precious stones are no substitute for the true Teacher. Nor can a collection of forms, outmoded rites and empty phrases provide that vital potency of the Dharma's ancient essence in order to triumph against the onslaught of a perverse age whose coming darkness the Buddha so clearly and fully foretold.

History has no example to offer on how religions can be revived by any humanly conceived scheme or mechanism. As any student of history knows, such attempts have only led to division and fragmentation, not a

¹⁸ Digha-nikaya, I.103-104. Mahavastu, I.160

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Dhammapada, vv.192

revivification of the original creed or of its pristine purity. To wit Martin Luther's "protestations" against corruption in Roman Catholicism merely created Protestantism, and similar examples can be easily cited in all other faiths.

Nothing short of a "Buddha-rising" – the advent of the promised Buddha Maitrya-Amitabha can sweep away from the Dharma the morass of accretions which centuries of human greed and ignorance have created to obscure its pristine message of salvation and well-being. And only a "Buddha-rising" can recreate the pure concept of the Samga and mould it into a dynamic instrument for offering a revived Dharma as the panacea for our travailing age – the safe haven for humanity.

Conclusion

The Buddha boldly proclaimed the recurrence of "Buddha-risings" – progressive revelation of the Divine – at long intervals of time and placed His own mission within the framework of that process of "Buddha-risings" – as one among others.

His famous narrative concerning the advent of His Successor – Maitrya – begins with His apostle, Sariputta asking the Buddha:

"The Hero that shall follow you,
The Buddha – of what sort will he be?
I want to hear of him in full.
Let the Visioned One describe him."²¹

To which the Buddha replies:

*"I will tell you, Sariputta,
Listen to my speech.
In this auspicious aeon
Three leaders have there been:
Kakasandha, Konagamana
And the leader Kessapa too.
I am now the perfect Buddha;*

²¹ Anagatavamasa.

*And there will be Metteyya too
Before this same auspicious aeon
Runs to the end of its years.
The perfect Buddha, Metteyya
By name, supreme of men.”²²*

The Buddha then describes at length the legendary exploits and attainments of Maitrya (Metteyya) and then entertains Sariputta's further questions concerning the time and conditions relating to Maitrya's appearance, all of which He answers in detail.

While, unlike the adventist scriptures of other Faiths, the prophetic utterances of the Buddha regarding the Promised Maitrya-Amitabha do not lend themselves to “one-liners”, nevertheless, after years of research into the adventist scriptures of both the Theravada and Mahayana schools of Buddhism, the author's 500 page thesis *Buddha Maitrya-Amitabha Has Appeared* (ISBN. 81-85091-83-8)²³ conclusively proves that Baha'u'lláh the Founder of the Baha'í Faith is indeed the risen Maitrya-Amitabha awaited by the Buddhists to effect the revivification of the Dharma.

Acknowledgement: The author is grateful to Dr Teo Chua Tee for producing a software copy of this paper.

²² Anagatavamsa. Also, Anguttara-nikaya, i.87, Vinaya-pitaka, ii.235ff.

²³ Refer to Buddha Maitrya-Amitabha Has Appeared (ISBN.81-85091.83.8) by Jamshed K. Fozdar. (In Singapore from STP Distributors Pte. Ltd.)

Life, Death and Immortality: the Taoist Religion in Singapore and the Bahá'í Faith

Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew

Abstract

This article outlines the main features of Taoist religious practices in Singapore and makes a preliminary comparison of two religions, which at first glance, could not be more disparate, namely the Taoist religion and the Bahá'í Faith. The article seeks to determine whether some sort of unity may be found beneath the apparent dichotomy between these two and whether and in what way the gulf between these two distinct religions from different times and origins, may somehow be spanned.

Introduction

After my mother's miraculous recovery from a serious illness with help from a Christian doctor, both my parents indicated their conversion to Christianity by physically disposing of all the "idols" which had graced their family home. As a child, I was therefore deprived of the direct influence of the religion of my ancestors. However, I remember vividly the ancestral home of my uncle, the eldest brother of my father, who lived across the road. The influence of religion on tradition was visible everywhere. Upon entering the house, one saw paper gods both on portrait and character form posted on the doors for protection against possible invasion by evil spirits*. Near the door and on the floor was an altar to *Ta-po-kung*, the local God of the soil, who brought luck and virtue to the

family¹ and protected the family against destructive influences. In the courtyard was the Heavenly official, *T'ien Kuan* while the wealth gods, whose job was to bring prosperity to the family were in the main sitting room of the house. Of course, there was *Tsao-shen*, the kitchen God in the kitchen, whose duty it was to make an annual report to the Jade Emperor, the "supreme God" in Heaven regarding the conduct and behaviour of the family and its members. On festival days and during times of birth, marriage or death, there were even more religious activities in front of the altars in the home, in temples and on the streets, and on such occasions an atmosphere of awesome sacredness and reverence was pervasive.

My uncle has since passed away and the house sold, resold, and torn down to make way for urban renewal, as has been the fate of many old houses in Singapore since the 1960's. Nevertheless, as an adult, I remain enthralled by ceremonies, rituals and things religious. In this article, I would like to make a preliminary comparison of two religions, which on first glance, could not have been more divergent -- the Taoist religion as popularly practised in Singapore and the Bahá'í Faith. My quest is to discover whether some common denominators exist beneath the surface contradictions of these two Faiths separated by millennia and vast distances and demonstrate how such common denominators could be fashioned into instruments of understanding linking the Taoist and Bahá'í Faiths.

A few salient points must first be noted about the Taoist religion. First and foremost, the Taoist *religion* is very different from the Taoist *philosophy*. The latter is represented by the philosophies of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, documented in the texts ascribed to them, namely the *Tao-te-ching* and the *Chuang-tzu* as well as the later materials such as the *Huainanzi* and the *Liezi*. The Taoist religion, on the other hand, can be traced to Chang Tao-ling (circa 2nd Century CE) who claimed that he had a vision whereby Lao-tzu gave him the authority to organise religious communities, to forgive faults and sins, to heal and most important, to exorcise ghosts, demons and evil spirits. Over the centuries, many different schools of Taoism arose, built on Chang's vision, and drawing

¹ Sometimes called *lao-yeh* (the lord), *tu-ti-yeh* (the lord of the soil) or *lao-po-kung* (the elderly po-kung) according to different dialect groups.

inspiration, imagery, and eventually even gods from the original philosophy of Lao-tzu. Taoism began to focus on revelations, healing, rituals, oracles and shamanistic practices, developed monasteries inspired by Buddhism, and established a network of temples throughout China. Understandably, these two strands – *religious* Taoism and *philosophical* Taoism -- gave rise to much perplexity by outside observers, one being a sophisticated philosophy and the other interwoven with elaborate rituals and fantastic visions of countless gods.

The second noteworthy point is that where the masses of poor Chinese immigrants to Singapore in the 19th century and early 20th Century were concerned, they were not from the professional or educated elites (who would have been more attracted to philosophical Taoism or Confucianism); rather they were the “Chinese masses” from the lower and middle working classes,² and were therefore more attuned to religious Taoism. These people were my ancestors on both sides of my family and while the more sophisticated Chinese may not be particularly proud of the heterogeneous practices of the masses, it would be difficult for them to deny that it contains much that is meaningful in the culture of the masses of immigrants. In Singapore, while there may be a handful of small establishments where *philosophical* Taoism is practised; it is in its popular or religious form that Taoism has a strong hold upon the religious thought and practices of the people.

Third, it must be realised that the Taoist religion is a major part of what one may call “the Chinese religion”.³ In Singapore, this term is taken to mean a characteristic amalgam of religious Taoism, Mahayana Buddhism, a dash of Confucianism and a great deal of spirit-mediumship.⁴ It is a “Chinese religion” and one which is eclectic and polytheistic in nature. As the popular saying goes: “The average Chinese

² Heinze, Ruth-Inge. “The Dynamics of Chinese Religion. A Recent Case study of Spirit Possession in Singapore.” In Cheu, Hock Tong, *Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia*. Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications Sdn. Bhd., 1993.

³ See Chew, Phyllis Ghim-Lian, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá’í Faith*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1993.

⁴ Clammer, J. “Religious Pluralism and Chinese Beliefs in Singapore”, In Cheu, Hock Tong, *Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia*.

wears a Confucian crown, a Taoist robe, and Buddhist sandals." In other words, a Chinese can claim that he is both a Taoist (a lover of nature), a Confucianist (who is serious about his duties), and a Buddhist (deeply aware of the transience of life) at the same time. This kind of practical wisdom is illustrated in folk temples not just in Singapore but in the thriving Chinese communities of Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong where statues of Confucius, Lao-tzu and Buddha are set up alongside those of traditional Chinese immortals as objects of veneration.⁵

Finally, it must be noted that while the religion of the Chinese in Singapore has always been identified with Buddhism, "Buddhism" is found to be used as a convenient religious label where in fact a large number of those who claim to be Buddhists, are actually practitioners of the Chinese religion.⁶ Similarly, the Taoist influence is strongly visible in most Singapore temples, even though these temples may be reputed to be Buddhist ones.⁷ The 1990 Singapore census reports that among the Singapore Chinese population, 68% are Taoist/Buddhist, 13% Christians and 14% with no religion and 5% of other religions.⁸ The most prevalent form of the Chinese syncretic religion is said to be *Shén Jiào*, ("Doctrine of the gods"). *Shén* means "spirit" - and this refers to the worship of the spirit of some deified hero or emperor. In this article, the terms *shénism* and Taoism can therefore be used interchangeably.

⁵ Actually, the Chinese religion is even more complex than this simple trilogy. A recent survey found that besides Taoism and Confucianism, there were seven schools of Buddhism (including Mahayana, Theravada, Pure Land, *Ch'an* and the Japanese Nichiren school), at least nine syncretic religions (including the Great Way of Former Heaven, the *P'u T'u Men* or salvation sect, the *Kuei Ken Men* or way-of reverting-to-the-first-principle sect, and the well known Red Swastika Society and many spirit-medium cults, pure Chinese ones, Sino-Malay ones and Sino-Indian ones. Most of these were operating from small shop-front temples or shop-houses and even apartments.

⁶ This is because the Chinese hold canonical Buddhism in high regard because of its strict doctrines and principles. See Tong, Chee Kiong, *Trends in Traditional Chinese Religion in Singapore*. A Report prepared for the Ministry of Community Development, Singapore, 1988.

⁷ See Elliott, Alan J. A. *Chinese Spirit-Medium Cults in Singapore*. London School of Economics. London: the Athlone Press, 1955, Reprinted 1990.

⁸ *Census of Population. Advance Data Release*. Singapore: Dept. of Statistics. 1990.

It is time now to look at how *one* aspect of Taoism – *religious* Taoism -- is manifested in Singapore. While Taoism is, by self-definition, a way that does not cling to words or comparison, it is nevertheless one of the ways to unlock and understand the psyche of the Chinese population in Singapore. It can be described initially from three perspectives: its ritual rites, its spiritual functionaries, and through a popular local festival - that of the Nine Emperor gods.

The Taoist Religion in Singapore -- Coping with Life, Death and Immortality

Religious Taoism is essentially preoccupied with basic concerns, such as life, death, and immortality, and pragmatic issues relating to health, wealth, business and marriage. To ensure the wellbeing of such concerns, it was believed that the regular performance of rituals would placate the spirit world and enable one to lead a long, healthy and wealthy life free from unnecessary misfortunes. There was also the belief that the performance of good deeds would help in the cleansing of one's body, that physical illness was a consequence of immoral conduct; and that any cure would therefore require repentance and good work. Good health and long life could also be achieved through the ancient shamanistic arts of external alchemy (elixir) or internal alchemy (meditation and exercises).

Taoist Ritual Rites

For the religious Taoist, maintaining harmony with the environment is important and this is accomplished through the performance of highly complex rites involving symbolism, music and drama, all of which contribute to the articulation of the sacred mysteries. In these ceremonies, the first thing that strikes an observer is perhaps the ubiquitous presence of icons and symbols. Images of the deities are represented in statues, paper figures, portraits, banners and draperies. Accompanying these images are auspicious signs, cosmological symbols such as dragons, divine beings, and the diagram of the "great ultimate", a symbol of the Taoist cosmos. Music accompanies these ritual performances by signalling the different stages in the ritual. The music is urgent when

military action is undertaken against demons; it changes to a sombre note when the officials approach the noble deities.⁹

Taoist rituals can be divided into two categories - one for the benefit of the living and one for that of the dead.¹⁰ Both are complementary in the sense that unless the dead are kept content, according to traditional Chinese beliefs, lasting peace and prosperity for the living would not be possible. The first, rituals for the living, are large-scale communal thanksgiving celebrations marking either the anniversary of a patron deity of a community or commemorating an important event such as the completion of a new temple. On such occasions, the Taoist priest conveys the gratitude of the community to the gods and invites them to come and partake of the many ostentatious offerings laid on the altars and tables. There are also street processions, feasting and theatrical performances. Such occasions help bring the community together.

Like the living, the dead also demand close attention. If properly cared for, the dead would become caring ancestors and a source of help and blessings; if neglected, they could turn into malignant spirits. It is thus in the interest of the descendants to have the necessary rituals performed for the repose of the dead. The services of a Taoist priest is employed as he is believed to be able to pacify the soul of the deceased by guiding it, step by step, first to the subterranean world, then through the courts of judgement, and finally to the paradise of the blessed.

Like the ancient Hebrews, the ancient Chinese had a three-tiered world view, of heaven above, the dead below, and earth, the abode of the living,

⁹ It is possible that Chinese theatre had evolved from ritual performance. Taoist rituals are dramatic expressive, and at times even comical. For example, the purification rite that forms part of the creation of the ritual altar in a thanksgiving offering unfolds as a playlet, in which the Taoist priest chases and eventually subdues a masked acolyte impersonating a demon. The sessions called "Despatching the Writ of pardon" and "Attack on Hell" include lively dialogues, jest and acrobatics. These light-hearted and motion filled moments are akin to popular drama. The language is concrete and narrative rather than abstract or bureaucratic. The plot and roles are closely parallel to those of popular theatre and easily grasped by the audience. See Lee, C.Y., Chan, K. L. and Tsu, Y.H. *Taoism. Outlines of a Chinese Religious Tradition*. Singapore: Taoist Federation of Singapore, 1994.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*

in between. They believed that at death the upper soul (*hun*) rises up to heaven while the lower soul (*p'o*) descends to earth. The ancestors were often represented as somewhere "on high" with the Lord, and continued to have power over the living, whether to protect or bless them or to punish and curse them. Ancient Chinese literature, especially that of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., is fairly rich in essays and poems devoted to recalling the soul. The soul is called *hun-p'o*. *P'o* is the spirit of man's physical nature expressed in his body and his physical movement while *hun-p'o* survives him at death. When my father passed away, my mother would still expect his soul to return to the home at certain times of the year and the entire family would faithfully gather together with huge offerings of food and small rituals of reverence to observe his return. Where the masses was concerned, there was no question that the individual continued to live after death.¹¹

Spiritual Functionaries

A distinctive feature of the Taoist religion is its extravagance which is manifested in innumerable spiritual beings, gods or celestials and immortals as well as deified heroes and forces of nature, all of whom are empowered to intervene in human affairs. Resembling in its functions the imperial Chinese state bureaucracy, they make up a highly sophisticated structured pantheon. According to Taoist theology, the divine government is headed by a triumvirate known as the "three pure ones" (*Sanqing*), all three of which emanate directly from the Tao.¹² The highest of the three is generally agreed to be "Celestial Venerable of the Original beginning" (*Yuanshi Tianzun*), the embodiment the supreme creator of all things. The second is to the left of the supreme pure one "Celestial Venerable of the Luminous Treasure" (*Lingbao Tianzun*) and is depicted as holding the famous Taoist "diagram of the supreme ultimate" (*taiji tu*). The one on the right is the "most high lord Lao", another formal representation of the "divine" Lao-tzu.

¹¹ See Ching, Julia. *Chinese Religions*. London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd, 1993.

¹² In a typical Taoist temple, these three deities would sit in the "Hall of the Three Pure Ones" (*Sanqing dian*).

However, while there may be thousands of deities, in actual worship, only a few popular ones stand out because they are perceived to be more merciful and have a special regard for the people. One of the most influential is *Tianhou*, the "Empress of Heaven"¹³. Another is *Dabogong*, the earth deity who presides over a wide range of affairs including health, wealth and general safekeeping.¹⁴ Another popular personage is *Guandi*, (Lord Guan) known as *Guangong*, (the "God of War"), a famous warrior in early China whose heroic deeds have been immortalised in the classical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdom*.¹⁵ One must not forget too the widely celebrated eight immortals (*xian*) who while occupying a low category in the divine hierarchy are very appealing to the masses due to the fact that they have a special affinity for the problems of daily life, since they were all human beings at one time.

An important functionary on the physical plane who is able to help the individual make communication with the divinities in the spirit world is the spirit-medium, who would frequently call on a personal spirit to come down and enlighten him or her. If one desires to speak urgently to one's departed ancestor, one would seek the help of a medium who would be able to relay messages to and from the departed ancestors while in a trance. Another service which the medium provides is the performance of ritual healing for illnesses or problems such as spirit possession, the loss of the soul by witchcraft and ailments caused by natural elements. The standard cure for the first two is essentially to exorcise the evil spirits responsible, while the treatment for the disharmony of natural elements is based on the prescription of herbal medicine. Both categories, however, entail a lavish use of *fu* (charms) which include amulets, talismans, and prayer charms.

¹³ *Tianhou* was born into a seafarer's family with the name of Lin, and blessed with special spiritual powers which she used to help her family and others. In particular, she is well remembered for having saved her brothers who were caught in a storm at sea, by going out to them in spirit and guiding them to safety. Eventually her divinity was recognised and temples built in her honour.

¹⁴ This name refers to the elder brother of one's grandfather or "granduncle". Although occupying a relatively minor place in the divine hierarchy, this deity is very popular.

¹⁵ Because of his courage, loyalty and moral integrity, he serves as the patron saint of policeman, gangsters and secret societies.

The Festival of the Nine Emperor gods

An example of a popular festival observed in Singapore and Malaysia, where all the pomp and circumstance of the Taoist religion may be observed is that of the Nine Emperor gods. While there are many versions recounting the origin of this festival, the Singapore version has it that these are the nine divine brothers in charge of life, death, health, disease, happiness, fortune, prosperity, wealth and longevity. The festival gets under way on the last day (18th or 19th) of the eighth Moon. This festival may be said to be proto-typically "taoist" or "shénistic" in the sense that one sees the central concerns of the faithful, namely, the veneration of life, the need for protection against evil spirits, and the pursuit for a long, peaceful, healthy and wealthy life.

The display of these sentiments is clearly represented in the myth, ritual and symbol which form the dominant pillars of the Nine Emperor God Festival.¹⁶ The start of the festival is signified by the erection of a *gaodeng* (tall lamp) to the left of the temple-square. Here, a consecration ritual is performed to purify the temple ground, and the spirit soldier of heaven, earth, and water and fire are released and deployed. Actual celebrations begin with the staging of an Amoy opera on the first day of the Ninth Moon and reach a climax on the ninth day, with a *Koujun* (special feasts to the spirit soldiers and the laity) on the third, sixth and ninth days. The end of the celebration -- on the tenth day -- is marked by the lowering of the tall lamp and the recalling of the spirit soldiers from their respective posts.

The festival also sees street processions, starting from the temple, led by two disciples carrying one half of the Eight Trigrams flag and others with musical instruments. During the festival devotees have to offer tea, fruits, flowers, and money and sacrifice of joss-sticks and white candles, burning of incense paper, paper images, charm papers and others. Here, a trance dance and trance rituals are performed by spirit mediums. While in spirit-mediumship, the spirit deity conveys a message that is comprehensible and translatable; in spirit possession, the spirit does not convey any message. The trance dance and rituals are performed in the streets and

¹⁶ See Cheu, *Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia*.

vicinity of the temple and are supposed to purify the environment. When the lion in the lion dance exhales, for instance, its breath is believed to repel *yin* forces and when it inhales, it is believed to draw in *yang* forces from the surrounding area. By so doing, the lion attracts *yang* and repels *yin*, thereby insuring harmony in the environment. The same effect is also produced by the fireball or spiked-ball display. In this display, spirit-mediums would either kick the red-hot iron ball, or swing a spiked-ball around. This kicking and swinging actions are supposed to enact the incandescent state of the primal universe to produce the five elements - fire, wood, water, earth and metal. The underlying significance here is to ensure the equilibrium of the universe in which humans live.

Having discussed the essential features of popular Taoism or Shénism as it is practised in Singapore, I will now compare it with the Bahá'í Faith; firstly, in terms of their spiritual/theological principles and secondly, their social orientation.

Comparing Spiritual and Theological Principles

First, it must be pointed out that there are certain features of Taoism which are strikingly in harmony with the Bahá'í Faith. Both the Taoist religion and the Bahá'í Faith believe that the great religions originate from the same source, and that in reality, there are no differences between their persons, words, messages, acts, and manners.¹⁷ This feature also explains why, historically, Taoism was able to assimilate and accommodate aspects of shamanism, Confucianism and Buddhism over the years. The Bahá'í Faith is also as inclusive in spirit as Taoism in the sense that there is a stress on the removal of religious prejudices and the establishment of a spirit of valuation and recognition of other religions that far transcends mutual tolerance. However, Bahá'ís would go one step further by advancing the concept of *progressive revelation* - that is, that the God or

¹⁷ This idea can be likened to the Chinese saying that tributaries branching out from the same river may start off at different points and time, bearing different names, but the supply of water content that each receives from its sources does not vary. It is the water rather than the name of the tributaries that serve a purpose for humanity.

Supreme Ultimate sends various prophets at different times in history bearing both a spiritual and social message.

There are other threads of connection. As a salvation religion, Taoism gives special importance to a Messiah figure who would usher in an epoch of Great Peace. This is found especially in the *T'ai-p'ing chng* (Classic of the Great Peace). Although incomplete and partially restored (7th century AD), it is sometimes regarded as the most important text after the *Tao-te ching*. It offers a doctrine of salvation, with a saviour or "divine man", in possession of a "celestial book", who teaches the return of ideal government while awaiting the arrival in the fullness of time of the Great Peace.¹⁸ Bahá'ís believe that the advent of Bahá'u'lláh is the fulfilment of this prophecy as well as other similar prophecies in other Holy Scriptures.¹⁹ They believe that Bahá'u'lláh is the "Great One" predicted in various scriptures, including the Taoist scripture, Who will usher in a period of Great Peace unique in human history and Who is destined to fulfil the prophecies of the Founders of earlier religions.²⁰

Certainly, like all great religions which have stood the test of time, Taoism has contributed towards the pool of not only the spiritual but also the material knowledge of humankind, for example, the development of such sciences as chemistry, mineralogy, and geography in China can be traced to Taoism.²¹ Furthermore, Taoism has also helped to regulate the moral life and unlock human potential. As a religion, it has

¹⁸ Also, according to Taoist belief, Lao-tzu has the power to appear in other times and places as well as the personification of the Tao. In this regard, a number of Taoist scriptures are devoted to the numerous transformation of Lao-tzu - the number is usually 81 (9 x 9) because of its perceived magical significance. See also Ching, J. *Chinese Religions and Practices in Southeast Asia*.

¹⁹ See Bible, Isaiah xi: 1, ii:4, xxxv:1-2; Matthew xxiv:14, 26-27, vii:15-20; Koran xxi:104, ii:206, xxxix:67-71; Bhagavad Gita: Fourth Discourse, Digha Nikaya III: 75-76; Dinkird (23).

²⁰ Many Chinese have dreamt of the Great Peace. Towards the middle of the 2nd Century, a master, Chang Chüeh, had a revelation that the advent of the Great Peace (t'a'-ping), which should be the commencement of the earthly paradise, would come with special signs. See Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*.

²¹ See Needham, J. *Science and Civilisation in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956.

characteristically emphasised the importance of good deeds and the accumulation of merit. In its unique way, it taught that to become a "celestial immortal", the highest grade of immortals, one needed to perform at least thirteen hundred good deeds; to become a lower grade immortal, no less than three hundred were deemed necessary. Later, when the genre of Taoist writings known as "ledgers of merit and demerit" gained currency, the moral teachings of Taoism become even more widespread. Essentially, this type of religious practice resembles an account book in which daily actions are classified as good and bad deeds, each of which is assigned a fixed number of merit or demerit points in late imperial China.²² Like all the other world religions, the Bahá'í Faith also has a great deal of ethical teachings focusing on virtues such as unity, justice, love, truthfulness, trustworthiness, detachment, humility, reverence, courtesy and kindness, although not always classifiable or accountable in such strict material terms as "merit" and "demerit" points.

There are of course as many differences as there are similarities. Although God is the one unnameable, invisible, the mother of all things in philosophical Taoism, there is in religious Taoism, the existence of the pantheon of gods and spirits in the Taoist religion, most of whom have anthropomorphic names, human characteristics and memorable faces. Here the Bahá'í Faith is more akin to philosophical Taoism since it declares that nothing can describe or give form to "the Absolute";²³ its scripture emphatically asserts that "He is indeed a true believer in the unity of God, who, in this Day will regard Him as One immeasurably exalted above all comparisons and likenesses with which men have compared Him."²⁴ For the Chinese peasants however, spirits and ghosts were regarded as secondary sources of life and were worshipped and

²² Another type of Taoist writings known as "morality books" became extremely popular. These aimed at promoting good deeds and subscribed to the six moral teachings adopted by the government, that is, filial piety, respect for age and authority, harmony with neighbours and friends and moral instruction for one's descendant especially proper conduct and avoiding improper behaviour.

²³ Philosophical Taoism with the portrayal of "the way" as absolute and transcendent, is closer in spirit to the Bahá'í Faith. See Chew, Phyllis Ghim Lian, "The Great Tao", *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 4, 2, 1991.

²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 3rd edn. 1976, p 337

thanked for their benevolence. As maintainers of life on earth, the spirits of rivers, trees and mountains were also venerated.

It must be noted that while there may be countless gods and goddesses in the Taoist pantheon, in principle, they are all under the command of a sovereign high God and have their specific station in the divine hierarchy. In other words, while polytheism is the popular image of Taoism, it is actually monotheism which underlies the religious attitude of the Chinese. A practical reason also accounts for Taoism polytheistic exterior. For a religion catering to the needs of a much earlier era, the "unknowable" and remote Tao as expounded in the *Tao-te ching* of Lao-tzu did not offer much consolation to the primitive mind. An anthropomorphic pantheon of gods therefore evolved through time to allow devotees to turn to more approachable deities who may be of inferior rank but nevertheless able to dispense blessings or intercede on their behalf.

It is intellectually difficult for agrarian people of an earlier age to be comfortable with an absolutely transcendental God, Who, by His own Will created a spatio-temporal universe within the framework of contingency. Popular Taoism therefore conceived the Supreme Ultimate as a kind of immanent transcendental being.²⁵ This immanence is often expressed emphatically by the immanent universal love and union of Earth and Heaven. This concept of cosmic union involves the idea of the one and single God immanent in everything.²⁶ The love of Heaven is united with that of Earth and everything that is in it. Here, Heaven is perceived as "giving" and Earth as "receiving". Giving belongs to the sphere of centripetal power *yang*; receiving is within the sphere of centrifugal power *yin*. The confluence of the two powers, like a symphony of love, produces an infinite variety of form and colour of lives.

²⁵ This attribution of transcendence to Tao however is challenged by those who inspired by the writings of philosopher A. N. Whitehead, consider Taoism to be a kind of process philosophy. They consider Tao to be immanent, the sum total of being and non-being.

²⁶ See Peerenboom, R. P. "Cosmogony, the Taoist Way." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 17, 1990, p 157-174.

While the expression of this dual force takes on a very Chinese colouring, it should be noted that the Bahá'í scriptures, interestingly enough, also acknowledge these two forces.²⁷ However, the Bahá'í Faith's version of immanence is slightly different. It expounds that in a sense, the whole of creation is infused with the "presence" of the Creator. However, while causality is indeed the universal law, yet the effect is not the Cause (in this instance "the Creator"). Hence the Bahá'í Faith distinguishes "immanence" (presence) from "identity" (essence). While adherents of religious Taoism believe that they can merge with God or become God while in a trance, Bahá'ís view this claim as misguided since it would again mean merging the cause with the effect. Here, *philosophical* Taoism is more in harmony with the Bahá'í Faith since it stresses the transcendence of Tao. The distinction between *essence* and *presence* is clearly emphasised in the Bahá'í Faith: "How can I claim to have known Thee when the entire creation is bewildered by Thy Mystery, and how can I confess not to have known Thee, when, lo the whole universe proclaimeth Thy Presence and testifieth to Thy Truth?"²⁸ In other words, while the Creation is infused with the Creator's presence, the Creation is not synonymous with the Creator.

Again, while both Taoist and Bahá'í generally concur that the status of the departed spirit can be either promoted or degraded, and that progress in the spiritual world is influenced by the intercession of others through prayers and good works done on earth in the name of the departed, yet there the similarity ends. This is because popular Taoism has elevated the practice of this principle to the status of "ancestor worship", where death ceremonies and anniversaries of ancestors become elaborate and costly

²⁷ Consider the following quotation from the Bahá'í scriptures: "They have said that the potentialities (*qabiliyyat*) and the recipients of the potentialities (*maqbulat*) came into being and were created simultaneously. For example, it has been stated that all things are composed of two elements: the "Fashioner" (*qabil*) and the "Fashioned" (*maqbul*). By "Fashioned" is meant substance (*madda*) and primary matter (*huyula*), and by Fashioner is meant form and shape, which confines and limits the primary matter from its state of indefiniteness and freedom to the courtyard of limitation and definite form." (*Makatib* 2:35) A provisional translation by Moojan Momen in *Bahai Studies Bulletin* 3.4.26-27.

²⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976 p. 63.

ritualistic affairs. Thus, while the motive is shared -- gratitude towards parents and grandparents for the gift of life -- its expression is not. Religious Taoism has made ancestor worship into a fine art; for the Bahá'í, simplicity and sincerity is the keynote, that is, it is the intention rather than the form which is valued and emphasised.

Another disparity is that while there are many different Taoist sects rivalling one another for supremacy and orthodox status, the Bahá'í Faith has remained united in creed and practice throughout the world. While this fact is often explained away by referring to the age difference --- the Bahá'í Faith is only approximately 150 years old in comparison to more than 2,000 years of Taoism, yet this is not the most important reason. The unity of the Bahá'í community is predicated upon clear and detailed instructions for the organisation of Bahá'í society, which exist within its sacred text. There is no provision for clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Explicit instructions concerning succession is also given. Bahá'u'lláh clearly named a successor in His Last Will and Testament, also known as the *Book of the Covenant*. This written covenant is unique among the world's major religions²⁹, and has safeguarded the Bahá'í Faith against division or the rise of individual leadership in the governing of the Bahá'í community, despite it having spread to every nook and cranny of the planet within its short history of 150 years. Of course, in the case of Taoism, the process of succession is not an issue since the foremost proclaimer of the "Tao", Lao Tzu (an anonymous term meaning "old man") did not claim to be a prophet. As Chew (1993) has noted, while the Bahá'í Faith is a religion in the conventional sense, with a prophet and a revelation; the Chinese religion in which Taoism plays a major part, is "a religion without revelation".³⁰ Since there is no dogma based on divine revelation, or a church as guardian of unchangeable dogmatic truth, everyone is free to believe anything he or she chooses. The Taoist official of a particular region may be loosely connected, have a regular job and

²⁹ Jesus obliquely indicated the primacy of Peter, but the comment recorded leaves room for doubt about its significance. Nor was the guidance given by Muhammad about His successor enough to prevent Islam splitting into many sects, each recognising a different line of succession after Muhammad.

³⁰ It is possible that the timelessness of the *Tao-te ching* is due to the inspiration received from an earlier revelation in China's history. See Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*. pp. 49-51.

put on priestly vestment only when the occasion arises. In such a situation, it was not surprising to find great regional variation in the practice of Taoism. Taoism has, for example, no precise membership requirements, a point of divergence with not only the Bahá'í Faith but the other major religions, where a believer is defined a little more stringently, usually by a set of doctrines and practices. Bahá'ís define their members as those who have accepted Bahá'u'lláh as the messenger of God for this age, and this often requires that the member sign a declaration card to that effect for administrative purposes, including also the electoral roll for the annual election of their governing bodies.

Possessing multifarious ceremonies and rituals, religious Taoism is also at variance with the Bahá'í Faith. In popular Taoism, ritualistic practices tend to take the centerstage and often the intention behind the ritual is forgotten; in the Bahá'í Faith, deeds are stressed over rituals, as they are in the high moral and ethical teachings described by Lao-tzu. For Bahá'ís, a good life does not comprise so much the performance of rituals, but of praiseworthy moral conduct and righteous deeds to their fellow human beings. Indeed, the Bahá'í scripture points out that "one hour's reflection is preferable to seventy years of pious worship."³¹ For the Bahá'í, religion is more than just a system of teaching, commandments, prohibitions, rites and customs; it is in fact a living, active and transforming force. It must be acknowledged, however, that popular Taoist rituals serve a function since they enable their observers to fill their lives with a significance which they would not otherwise have. Community thanksgiving celebrations, for example, offer a helpful avenue to reassert good will and harmony among the members of the community. The engagement of a ritual often fills the empty spaces in the lives of the adherents and gives them a connection to the past, providing a satisfactory answer to most, if not all, of the major questions and quests for life. The difference between religious Taoism and the Bahá'í Faith lies centrally in the degree of how much priority *form* should have over *essence*.

The belief in evil forces, the personification of demons in the Taoist religion, and the elaborate measures to exorcise them through spirit-

³¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-I-Iqan. The Book of Certitude*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975.

mediums is also at distinct variance with the relatively more "scientific" Bahá'í Faith, since Bahá'u'lláh taught that evil has no intrinsic existence as a separate entity. In the Bahá'í scriptures, darkness is described as the absence of light, hence evil is the absence of good in the same way as ignorance is the lack of knowledge and hatred the lack of love. Nevertheless, and in all fairness to Taoism, we must remember that religious Taoism emerged at a time when the masses were credulous and mostly uneducated people with no scientific knowledge. If one can see popular Taoism or shénism as the religion of man's childhood and a solace to his innermost apprehensions, one may understand that humanity's spiritual fears and aspirations has always been intrinsically similar, only that the expression in man's childhood tends to take on more personified and concrete forms.

Comparing Social Principles

While the *spiritual/theological* teachings of all religions are basically similar in terms of their collective belief in an ultimate goal or Being, the existence of an afterlife and the necessity of good deeds in the material world of existence, each of them also contain *social* laws such as those pertaining to food, marriage, etc. which are peculiar to them alone. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that each religious personage, from Zoroaster, Buddha etc., on to Bahá'u'lláh has appeared at different times and in different places, and thus given laws and ordinances befitting the needs of the particular time of their appearance.

While the essential spiritual core of religion remains as it always has been, the evolving aspect concerns the socio-political conditions which require new laws to fit the different requirements that change from age to age. Every body of belief, whether religious or secular, has a vision and ideal. For example, Marx proposes the ideal of an egalitarian society where there are no classes and no exploitation, and where each individual receives benefits according to his true needs. Confucianism finds supreme harmony in a disciplined and ordered human relationship. Buddhism perceives all reality as interdependent and teaches man to achieve union with it through rejection of the drives and desires of a separate ego. Taoism finds harmony in nature and naturalness and dreams of

immortality beyond life on earth. For the Bahá'í the essential goal is to achieve a vision that is world-embracing and one which would lead to the unity of mankind and the establishment of a world civilisation based on peace and justice.

If there is a major difference between religious Taoism and the Bahá'í Faith, it lies centrally in the area of social rather than spiritual principles. Appearing in the mid- 19th Century, the Bahá'í Faith brings with it distinctive social laws which are necessarily absent in the Taoist framework. For the first time in history, a religion has explicitly stated that humanity can and must create an international federation capable of co-ordinating the use of the earth's resources and solving the problems facing the entire planet. A high priority is given in the Bahá'í Faith to the just resolution of regional and international conflicts. Efforts are made to forge a unified approach to environmental degradation, and to establish conditions where the free movement of goods, services and peoples across the globe becomes possible.

There is a clear recognition in the Bahá'í Holy Writings of the inordinate disparity between the rich and poor as a source of acute suffering and one which keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. There is a call for all people to internalise the principle of the oneness of humanity. The implementation of a world auxiliary language and a standard script, in addition to the mother tongue, is also advocated as a basis for improved communication between all inhabitants of the world.³² For Bahá'ís, social problems must be resolved on the basis of universal justice. All the resources for the world must be exploited for the benefit of mankind as a whole.

Another unique social principle of the Bahá'í faith, which is a non-issue in both philosophical and religious Taoism, is that men and women have equal rights. Women have traditionally played a lesser role in the patriarchal pantheon of the Taoist religion with most of the major gods being men. In the Bahá'í Faith, the question of equality of education and opportunity for the female sex takes precedence worldwide. Its scriptures

³² See Chew, Phyllis Ghim Lian. "Whither the International Auxiliary Language?" *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 2.2. 1989, pp 1-11.

unequivocally pronounce the equal status of women as the touchstone for a mature, society, which has given up discriminating against or suppressing any group on the basis of biological difference.

An additional feature which sets the Bahá'í Faith apart from Taoist beliefs and practices and which places it squarely in the 20th Century is its pronouncement that religion must be in harmony with science and reason, that is, religion and science must complement one another and not be mutually exclusive. Bahá'ís believe that value-free science without religious and moral attachment fosters materialism. Similarly religion without the influence of science often leads to fanaticism. Last but not least, the Bahá'í scripture also stresses that all people must independently seek the truth with determination and a critical mind, a demand which Bahá'ís deem essential because preconceptions hamper the irrefutable growth of contact between people, races and religions and are a hindrance to the goal of unification. As the Bahá'í Faith is devoid of a clergy (a significant departure from all previous religions, including religious Taoism), the independent investigation of truth becomes a crucial principle.

Conclusion

To be human is to question, and to engage in a variety of quests; for survival, for liberty, for truth, for happiness, and, in many cases, for some kind of meaning to life. There are at least six combinations of fundamental questions and resulting quests comprising human existence. One is survival: "What must I do to survive?" Next is security: "What can I hold on to?" or "In whom can I put my trust?" Next is to do with quality of life: "How can I be happy?". Another common quest is personal identity "Who am I?" Then there are the transpersonal goals which has brought forth the quest for truth, excellence, liberty and justice in all periods of history, such as: "What is the meaning of life?", "Is there a purpose to my existence?" and "How can I make this world a better place?" In the past, adherents of religious Taoism have been essentially preoccupied with the first three questions, being concerned primarily with issues of personal survival and well-being. The Bahá'í Faith, on the other hand, emphasises

both personal salvation and social salvation, viewing the two as inter-related.

It is difficult to reconcile religious Taoism with many classic Taoist texts such as the *Tao-te ching* and the *Chuang-ízu*. Two thousand years of tradition has set it apart. Religious Taoism has evolved over centuries to fulfil basic human needs and concerns about the Ultimate and as a result has accumulated an enormous "bible" of esoteric texts, comprehensible only to those with special competence. There has also developed a grand liturgical tradition based on ritual texts, a well-defined eremitic tradition and distinctive techniques towards transcendent immortality.

Nevertheless, religious Taoism may be viewed as an adaptive set of strategies for people to cope with their relationship to life, death and immortality since it offers immediate attention to the devotee and uses a holistic approach to solve individual problems. Centred on the creation of harmony between the different worlds of existence and of the relationship between man and the "spirit" of nature, it affirms the mystical experience while encouraging a moral life.

Like everything ancient, religious Taoism has to confront the challenges of societal change. Religious Taoism has been dying for centuries and modern science and materialism is speeding up the process. Whether it can continue to survive the test of time and prosper in the modern world will depend largely on its effort to rein in excesses, renew its spiritual vigour and serve the needs of a changing society. The Bahá'í Faith can be a way to renew its spiritual life, and apply it to the modern world -- a way to revive it today. It shares with Taoism important fundamental spiritual values and introduces social principles compatible with the spirit of the 20th Century.

In the period 1980-1990 in Singapore, the number of Taoist/Buddhist adherents declined from 73% to 68% of the population,³³ most of its remaining adherents coming from the less-educated Chinese-speaking

³³ See *Census of Population 1980 Release No. 9. Religion and Fertility* and *Census 1990 Advance Data Release*. Dept. Of Statistics, Singapore.

segment of the population.³⁴ A 1988 survey of Singapore religions found that a significant 74.5% of Chinese respondents with no formal education claim to be Taoist/Shénists, while Christianity seems to appeal to those with higher education. A correlation was also found between the medium of instruction (Chinese, English etc) and religious affiliation. Taoism/Shénism is seen as a religion of the Chinese-educated sector of the population while Christianity is seen as the religion of the English-educated. Also, Christianity is on the increase among the younger age group and this is done at the expense of Taoism.³⁵

In recent years, the Singapore Taoist community has risen to the challenge. The recently formed (in 1990) *Taoist Federation of Singapore* has begun to organise public talks and has encouraged the publication of literature both in Chinese and English. Its promotion of *philosophical* Taoism, rather than *religious* Taoism is an attempt to return to the beginning and to emphasise essence over form. It promotes the intrinsic essence of mysticism, naturalism and simplicity rather than the rites and rituals of popular Taoism.³⁶ The community has also initiated the modernising of Chinese temples such as the great Bright Hill Buddhist Temple, the Tua Peh Kong Temple at Kusu or the Siong Lim Temple at Toa Payoh -- such as renovations, repainting of car parks and construction of new buildings.³⁷

To conclude, it is obvious that there is a great variety in appearance, metaphors, and terminology in all the great religions. In this paper, I have attempted to draw out similarities and differences between one of the

³⁴ The bulk of conversions to Christianity occur among teenaged high school students, mostly from a Chinese religious background, most of whom have considerable exposure to the English language and to a "modern" lifestyle.

³⁵ See Tong, Chee Kiong, *Trends in Traditional Chinese Religion in Singapore*.

³⁶ The *Tao-te ching* contains the essence of sacred literature and has often been referred to as the essence of Taoism. See e.g. the speeches given by Taoist leaders during the annual commemoration of World Religion Day, Singapore, 1995 to 1997. *Proceedings of World Religion Day*, Singapore: Singapore Bahá'í Community. 1995. 1995. 1997.

³⁷ It should also be noted that while many private Mahayana and spirit-medium temples have been swept away by urban redevelopment, many have gone into high-rise apartments from which the mediums often operate on a part time basis.

oldest and the youngest religions of the Chinese as practised in Singapore. The greatest differences between the Taoist religion and the Bahá'í Faith lie in their social laws, vision and practices, rather than in their spiritual aspirations. Religions' greatest affinity with one another, however, is their intrinsic spiritual concern with life, death and immortality. All the great religions have been the foundation of great cultures, and for thousands of years, provided the moral beacon and ballast for millions of people in their everyday life. As the *I Ching* reiterates: "In this world there are many different roads but the destination is the same. There are a hundred deliberations but the result is one."³⁸ The aim of the Bahá'í Faith is to revive the spiritual traditions and extend their teachings to the modern world.

I am no longer a child and the gods which adorn the altars of my ancestors have long since been discarded. In their former places of abode, tall skyscrapers have arisen, reflecting the concerns of a current materialistic age. Nevertheless, these childhood images of pious worship and deep reverence to spirits and ancestors have retained a special place in my heart. If it is true that the child is the father of the man, then in some way, such images must have helped me to seek and recognise the truth, the enduring and the sacred, in other places and forms. I continue to walk the path of my ancestors but with modern shoes. I pray, I worship and give thanks for blessings and I am sure if my ancient ancestors were alive, they would have given Bahá'u'lláh a place of honour on the altar of worship, believing sincerely in their hearts, that the spirit of this Great Being, whatever His origin and history, is deserving of praise and veneration and which comes, naturally, under the umbrella of the unfathomable, unreachable and utterly remote being -- the Great Tao.

³⁸ *The Book of Changes (I Ching)* cited in J. Legge, *The Four Books*, pt. 2, ch. 5. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960.

Chinese Family Religion and World Religion

Yeo Yew Hock

Abstract

This article examines the practice of filial piety and ancestor worship as practised by the traditional Chinese people. It tries to understand and enunciate the main principles that underlie this family oriented religion. The careful maintenance of genealogies and moral instruction of children with traditions of their forbears, help to keep the religious sentiments alive, reinforce the lineage and family solidarity. The ancestral cult is basic to Chinese religion, it is the one universal institution which has moulded Chinese society into its traditional form. Its interests, responsibilities, and loyalties tended to be focused inwards to the family and lineage rather than outward to the public realm. Although the Chinese people have never denied that there is an afterlife, they have always viewed it in the context of ancestral lineage.

The major strength of the family religion lies in its strong family unity wherever it is practised. Some Chinese philosophers have stated that to love thy neighbour, one should start with the love of one's parents. But it seems that the Chinese religion throughout the ages has developed into a very elaborate inwardly focused family religion with deification of the ancestors.

The family as an institution occupies a high place in Bahá'í beliefs. However, in contrast to the Chinese religion, the Bahá'í Faith is non-hierarchical and more consultative in its approach towards family relationships. The subservient role of women in the traditional Chinese family is also contrary to the Bahá'í principle of the equality of men and women. This paper will critically examine the points of agreement and divergence between the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith, with the purpose of discovering how the two might be brought closer together.

Introduction

The family has been the most dominant and resilient social institution throughout the history of the Chinese people. The family is of course important in other cultures and closely connected with religion, with its sacrament of marriage, its commandment to honour parents, and its duty to raise children in moral instruction. But the religious character of the Chinese family goes far beyond these aspects. This character, developing out of so-called "ancestor worship," makes religion among the Chinese, more a family matter, rather than one based on individual choice. The family is the primary concern, while the individual and communal matters are secondary. The family may be likened to a kinship corporation. In order to understand the Chinese people's psyche, it is imperative to study the principles underlying this particular ancient form of religion.

The Chinese people referred to throughout this paper are the traditional people of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and other parts of Asia. Although many of the original customs and religious rites and rituals of the family religion have been modified or have even disappeared because of Western influences, the basic practices and philosophy are still well known and ever present in the psyche of the Chinese people. It is significant that the Chinese civilisation is the oldest extant and most continuous of those civilisations still remaining. The practice of the family religion is a contributing factor to the enduring nature of the Chinese civilisation.

By comparing and contrasting the practices of the Chinese family religion to the Bahá'í Faith, we hope to foster a better understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, feelings, values and ethos of the Chinese people. Unlike the Bahá'í Faith which is a revealed religion, the Chinese family religion does not have a Prophet Founder. The main proponent is Confucius (551-479 BC) who is considered more a distinguished Teacher and Philosopher, and who stated explicitly in his writings that he was not a Prophet. "As to being a divine sage or even a Good Man, far be it for me to make any such claim"¹. He added, "A Divine Sage I cannot hope

¹ *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, New York: Vintage Books, 1971, 7:37

ever to meet, the most I can hope for is to meet a true gentleman."² However, the family religion was in existence long before the 6th Century BC when Confucius lived.

The Family and God

For the Chinese, the hierarchy of the members of the family is clearly delineated, and on which is based social protocol, customs and religious rites. At the head of the household lineage is the ancestor, then comes the grandfather, then the father, followed by the eldest son. They are placed in descending order of reverence, respect and authority.

In the Bahá'í Faith, the individual's recognition of the "Oneness of the Lord" precedes the family in spiritual significance. The family is also a very important institution in the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh said:

The fruits of the tree of existence are trustworthiness, loyalty, truthfulness and purity. After the recognition of the Oneness of the Lord, exalted be He, the most important of all duties is to have due regard for the rights of one's parents. This matter has been mentioned in all the Books of God.³

For the Bahá'í, there cannot be a choice between the Family and the Bahá'í Faith, choosing the family is equivalent to choosing the Bahá'í Faith. Family relationships, like all other relationships, must be ultimately founded in spiritual ties. Shoghi Effendi wrote:

"Deep as are Family ties, we must always remember that the spiritual ties are far deeper; they are everlasting and survive death, whereas physical ties, unless supported by spiritual bonds, are confined to this life."⁴

² *The Analects of Confucius*, 7:26

³ *Family Life*, compiled by Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Oakham, England, 1982, p 1

⁴ *Family Life*, p 21

Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship is usually a practice associated with more primitive cultures, and often a background element to more sophisticated ones. However, for the Chinese it has been the very basis of their "high culture" throughout history. There is evidence of the central role of the family religion in Chinese culture since 1,000 BC, during the Shang or Yin dynasty. The study of the early practice of oracle bones shows us clearly how the religious system of the most ancient age in China was based on ancestor worship.

The oracle bones were used as instruments of divination. The diviner smoothed off the surface of a tortoise-shell or cattle scapula and bore into this surface a series of concave depressions. He then scratched into the reverse surface a question the king wished to put to the supernatural powers. Touching a red-hot poker to the cavity beside the inscribed question, the diviner produced cracks in the bone, which he then interpreted as the response. The answer was noted down, and the confirmation that the answer had been correct was often added to maintain the credibility of the oracle. From a detailed study of such questions and answers, according to Tung Tso-pin, a leading authority on the subject, he concluded that despite their other religious beliefs "it was still ancestor worship that held the most important position in the religious life of the Yin people."⁵

However, ancestor worship is not just the ritual observances of individuals, it is also the root from which the main trunk of the family lineage tree with its many family branches grow.

Confined to Kinship Group

The first point to note about ancestor worship is that it is narrowly confined to the kinship group (also called the *tsu* or family tree). According to Confucius "Sacrifice to spirits which are not those of one's

⁵ Tung Tso-pin, *An Interpretation of the Ancient Chinese Civilisation*, Chinese Association for the United Nations, Taipei, 1952 p 19.

own dead is [mere] flattery.”⁶ Ancestor worship is therefore instrumental in reinforcing family cohesion and lineage. In such a family cult, the dead ancestor’s personality continues to have an influence on the family and on the eldest son long after he is dead. The assumption is also that there is the possibility of contact between dead and living family members. The original relationships remain in full force despite the death of a senior. The love and fear of the son for the father is increased by the son’s belief in the father’s continuing presence in spiritual form. In this way, many of the ancestors are deified.

In contrast, the Bahá’í Faith extends allegiance from the family to the service of the human family. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said:

“When you love a member of your family or a compatriot, let it be with a ray of the Infinite Love! Let it be in God, and for God! Wherever you find the attributes of God love that person, whether he be of your family or of another.”⁷

Family Lineage System and the Role of Women

The Chinese word for family lineage is *Tsu* (or tree). It refers to the male descendants of a common ancestor, bearing the same surname, and includes their wives and children. As the *Tsu* is patrilineal, the families of wives are excluded. A woman marries into her husband’s lineage and her relationship with her father’s lineage becomes minimal. The term for the women’s lineage is “*outside-tsu*” or “outside relatives.”

For the traditional Chinese, the role of the woman is inferior to that of the man as the attention of the Chinese family is focused on the male heir. Marriage is looked upon as a means of perpetuating this all-important end. If she cannot fulfil this duty then the husband is allowed by his parents to take a concubine to try and procreate the male heir. The

⁶ *The Confucian Analects*, trans. James Legge, 2d ed., Oxford, 1892, I.24.1.

⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 11th ed. Bahá’í Publishing Trust, London, England, 1969, p 38

women's rights are few. Priority of education is also given to the males in the family and often women are not accorded an education.

In the Bahá'í Faith, men and women have equal rights⁸. They are likened to the two wings of a bird, where mankind represents the bird. Just as the bird cannot fly without its two wings being balanced, so the equality of men and women is necessary for humanity to make progress. Also in the Bahá'í Faith, the education of daughters takes precedence over the sons, as the woman is considered to be the first teacher of the child in the family.⁹

Status of Ancestors

During the Chou dynasty, the ancestors of the ruling house are pictured as dwelling "on high" in some sort of close association with, and subordinate to, the Supreme Ruler in Heaven (*T'ien*). From this position they derive their power over their descendants. It is believed that they could intercede with *T'ien* to send down blessings or calamities:

"It is not that our former kings will not assist us, their descendants. It is just that Your Majesty is dissolute and cruel, and is thereby bringing about his own ruin. Therefore Heaven rejects us."¹⁰

"The recorder then [wrote] the prayer on wooden strips. It said, your first grandson So-and-So has met with a severe illness. If you three Kings are in fact obligated [to

⁸ see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 160

⁹ *The Kitab-I-Aqdas*, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa 1992, note 76, p199-200

¹⁰ Hsi Pai K'an Li, chapter entitled "The Earl of the West Slays [the Prince of] Li", *Shu Ching (The Book of Documents)*, trans. Bernhard Karlgren, Stockholm, 1950, 55/5-10; Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents. These are documents purporting to record words and deeds of ancient rulers and ministers from the legendary Sage King Yao to the early Chou dynasty.

present] a royal son to Heaven, let *T'ien* be substituted for the person of So-and-So."¹¹

In some respects the practice of praying to and offering assistance to the souls of dead relatives is similar to the Bahá'í belief in the power of prayer. It is believed that the prayers of the Concourse on High (that is, those pure souls that are traditionally believed to go to Heaven) can answer our prayers and bless us in this world.

"It is seemly that the servant should, after each prayer, supplicate God to bestow mercy and forgiveness upon his parents. Thereupon God's call will be raised; 'Thousands upon thousands of what thou hast asked for thy parents shall be thy recompense!' Blessed is he who remembereth his parents when communing with God. There is, verily, no God but Him, the Mighty, the Well-Beloved."¹²

"There are certain sacred duties on children toward parents, which duties are written in the Book of God, as belonging to God. The (children's) prosperity in this world and the Kingdom depends upon the good pleasure of parents, and without this they will be in manifest loss."¹³

Role of Lineage

A major difference between Chinese and Western families is the vital role of lineage in the Chinese system. In the West, the family nucleus typically splits off from the patrilineal stem. The ancestors precede us biologically,

¹¹ Chin Teng, chapter entitled, "The Metal-Strapped Depository", *Shu Ching (The Book of Documents)*, trans. Bernhard Karlgren, Stockholm, 1950, 27/6; Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents.

¹² *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, compiled by Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1976, p 94

¹³ *Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas*, Bahá'í Publishing Committee, New York 1930, p 262-3

but not socially. Among the Chinese, families typically remain attached to their lineage and are organically parts of a larger functioning whole. The lineage with its families might be more or less cohesive, depending on various economic and social factors. The family lineage system is rooted in a single founding ancestor. From this individual, down through the eldest son of each generation, a family line is perpetuated for many generations. This lineage system may last for several hundred years.

The lineage structure is a powerful tool in determining hierarchy and enshrining order in the extended family. It places each individual in a specified position with regards to all other relatives, according to generation and collateral distance. These relative positions are not only indicated by kinship terms but are strikingly exemplified in the degrees of mourning during the funeral of the father. The closer the relationship, the more elaborate the ceremonial grief required. Thus, according to the funeral rites, the eldest son has to wear the coarsest sackcloth for the longest time (three years) in mourning for his parents, whereas a more usual style of dress can be worn by the male cousin for only nine months. The elaborate mourning rites and wearing of mourning garments for long periods of time served to renew the lineage ties, especially in ancient times when life expectancy was short and deaths in an average *tsu* were frequent. Although these elaborate customs and rituals are no longer closely followed by most contemporary Chinese families in Singapore, the respect and reverence underlying all these family religious rites are still present during funerals, weddings, births and other anniversaries.

Lineage solidarity was also strengthened by family offerings made in the ancestral temple. This temple contains the tablets believed to be inhabited by the spirits of all the lineage's deceased members. Here the souls of the ancestors were visibly displayed in many rows of wooden tablets, standing in order of their seniority of relationships and generations on shelves under the tablet of the High Ancestor of the lineage. Periodically, all available members of the lineage would assemble in the temple to offer their communal sacrifices to their forefathers. Genealogical records, often kept for many centuries, as well as "family instructions" written by leading personalities, were also used to stress and maintain the unity of the family lineage.

The Chinese State in ancient times always operated through the Family system. It reinforced the institution of the *tsu* and its constituent families by leaving in the hands of village elders, all governmental authority, except that which was unavoidably the State's responsibility, like for example defence matters. The State also backed up the family lineage prescriptions for proper conduct (*li*) with criminal law (*fa*). At the same time, the prayerful and spiritual attitudes of the Chinese family members towards their ancestors played an important role in ancient times for the education, discipline and the moral code of the next generation of Chinese people.

In the Bahá'í Faith, ancestors are respected, but not deified. There are no rituals and rites attached to the funerals of the father and relatives or anniversaries held for their deaths. Commemoration is done via prayer and reading of the holy Bahá'í writings. The use of lineage positions, funeral rites and rituals to establish order and hierarchy are absent in the family.

Functions of *Li*

To understand further the religious character of the Chinese family we now take a look at the *li* system of proper conduct. The functions of *li* extend from the most important religious ceremonies to the trivialities of daily etiquette. *Li* serves primarily to demarcate the senior from the junior, the superior from the inferior. It means proper deportment for all social circumstances. In our age of exceptional freedom of thought and behaviour, the elaborate functions of *li* may appear to involve unnecessary hair-splitting. It serves, however, to provide an anthology, allowing us to understand the society of the ancients. Confucius himself was an authority on *li*, and the school that developed to spread his teachings laid great stress on the subject. To understand the background and meaning of the codes of *li* we refer to this passage by Confucius:

"They are the rules of propriety [*li*] that furnish the means of determining (the observances towards) relatives, as near and remote; of settling points which may cause suspicion or doubt; of distinguishing where there should

be agreement, and where difference; and of making clear what is right and what is wrong... To cultivate one's person and fulfil one's words is called good conduct. When the conduct is (thus) ordered, and the words are accordant with the (right) course, we have the substance of the rules of propriety...

The parrot can speak and yet is nothing more than a bird; the ape can speak, and yet is nothing more than a beast. Here now is a man who observes no rules of propriety; is not his heart that of a beast... Therefore, when the sages arose, they framed the rules of propriety in order to teach men, and cause them, by their possession of them, to make a distinction between themselves and brutes."¹⁴

The profound influence of *li* is also seen in this passage:

"In the right government of a state, the Rules of Propriety serve the same purpose as the steelyard in determining what is light and what is heavy; or as the carpenter's line in determining what is crooked and what is straight...When a superior man (conducts the government of his state) with a determining attention to these rules, he cannot be imposed by traitors and impostors. Hence he who has an exalted idea of the rules, and guides his conduct by them, is called by us a mannerly gentleman, and he who has no such exalted idea, and does not guide his conduct by the rules, is called by us one of the unmannerly people. These rules (set forth) the way of reverence and courtesy; and therefore when the services of the ancestral temple are performed according to them, there is reverence; when they are observed in the court, the noble and the mean have their proper positions; when the family is regulated by them, there is affection between father and son, and harmony among brothers; and when

¹⁴ *Li Ki* [Chi], translated by James Legge, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1885, book one, I, 1, pp. 62ff

they are honoured in the country districts and villages, there is the proper order between old and young.”¹⁵

Thus the *li* system serves mainly to establish hierarchy. Whether it refers to an individual's place at the social level or to the *tsu* (family), the underlying principle is hierarchical. Similarly, whether it is discussing secular or religious issues:

“The son of Heaven [the king] sacrifices (or presents oblations) to Heaven and Earth; to the (spirits presiding over the) four quarters; to (the spirits of) the hills and rivers; and offers the five sacrifices of the house---all in the course of the year. The feudal princes present oblations, each to (the spirit presiding over) his own quarter; to (the spirits of) its hills and rivers; and offer the five sacrifices of the house---all in the course of the year. Great officers present the oblations of the five sacrifices of the house---all in the course of the year. (Other) officers present oblations to their ancestors.”¹⁶

Based on *li*, the hierarchy of the Chinese traditional family is defined and related to male lineage in the family. In contrast, the Bahá'í Faith is more consultative and democratic and not hierarchical in nature.

“Regarding thy question about consultation of a father with his son, or a son with his father, in matters of trade and commerce, consultation is one of the fundamental elements of the foundation of the Law of God. Such consultation is assuredly acceptable, whether between father and son, or with others. There is nothing better than this. Man must consult in all things for this will lead him to the depths of each problem and enable him to find the right solution.”¹⁷

¹⁵ *Li Ki*, book twenty-three, 5-7, pp. 257f

¹⁶ *Li Ki*, book one, II, 3, p 116

¹⁷ *Family Life*, p 9

There are also certain duties and mutual obligations amongst family members in the Bahá'í Faith, but unlike the Chinese Family, they are not part of a hierarchical system. There is no ranking based upon male family members, and there is no over-riding need to produce a male heir. From the Bahá'í perspective, the unity of the family is the prime concern, wherein each family member plays a complementary role.

“According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the family being a human unit must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother, none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father likewise has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each the comfort of all; the honour of one the honour of all.”¹⁸

Filial Piety

The effectiveness of the *li* code of behaviour throughout the centuries can be attributed to the age-old doctrine in China called “*hsiao*”, or “filial piety.” It means variously, obedience to authority, obedience to the older generation, respect, reverence and gratitude to parents and senior relatives.

For millennia, Chinese social values have been dominated by the ethical concept of filial piety. The prevailing influence of this concept has

¹⁸ *Family Life*, p 12

permeated every aspect and activity of Chinese life and society. In reply to a question about what *hsiao* is, Confucius said,

“While [the parents] are living, serve them with *li*; when they die, bury them with *li*; sacrifice to them with *li*.”¹⁹

From Mencius, the authority second only to Confucius:

“Which is the greatest duty? Duty to parents is the greatest... Among our many duties, the duty of serving the parents is fundamental....”²⁰

From the *Hsiao Ching*, a work that attributes sayings from Confucius, is this famous passage:

“Filiality is the root of virtue, and that from which civilisation derives... The body is, the hair and skin are received from our parents, and we dare not injure them: this is the beginning of filiality. [We should] establish ourselves in the practice of the true Way, making a name for ourselves for future generations, and thereby bringing glory to our parents: this is the end of filiality. Filiality begins with the serving of our parents, continues with the serving of our prince, and is completed with the establishing of our own character.”²¹

Again, from the same work:

“In serving his parents the filial son is as reverent as possible to them while they are living. In taking care of them he does so with all possible joy; when they are sick he is extremely anxious about them; when he buries them he is stricken with grief; when he sacrifices to them he

¹⁹ *The Confucian Analects*, II. 5.3.

²⁰ *The Works of Mencius*, translated by James Legge, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1892) IV. 19.1.2.

²¹ *The Hsiao Ching*, translated by James Legge, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1899); Scripture of Filiality, I.

does so with the utmost solemnity. These five [duties] being discharged in full measure, then he has been able [truly] to serve his parents."²²

"There are three thousand [offences] meriting the five punishments, but there is no crime greater than unfiliality"²³

In ancient China, unfilial conduct was a serious crime under the law of the family religion. It was the right of parents to put an unfilial child to death, or at least to denounce him or her to the authorities for punishment, as prescribed in clearly defined criminal statutes. Cursing one's parents was a capital offence. The following behaviour were indictable:

The grounds for such an accusation were the prosecution or cursing of one's grandparents or parents; not living with grandparents or parents and separating one's property from theirs; failure to support one's grandparents or parents; marrying, entertaining, or ceasing to observe mourning before the end of the required mourning period; concealing a parent's death; and falsely announcing a grandparent's or parent's death... However, if a parent prosecuted a child as unfilial on other grounds, the authorities would not reject the case for this reason.²⁴

Filial piety is thus the basis of family relationships, the cardinal virtue of the good person, and the most powerful force operating to maintain the orderliness and structure of society required by the Chinese State in ancient times.

In the Bahá'í Faith, filial piety is also very important for the family. Bahá'u'lláh states: "Verily, We have enjoined on every son to serve his

²² *The Hsiao Ching*, Scripture of Filiality X.

²³ *The Hsiao Ching*, Scripture of Filiality XI.

²⁴ Ch'u T'ung-tsu, *Law and Society in Traditional China*, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1961, pp. 25f.

father”²⁵. This duty for the son to obey his father is similar to Chinese filial piety.

Marriage

Marriage is often closely associated with the preservation of the future generation. But the traditional Chinese family tends to think of it as the most important requirement for the support of the older generation and the generation that had already passed away. The duty of Chinese children was defined in terms of devoting themselves without reservation to the welfare of their parents. The duty of a son's wife was to share in her husband's complete devotion to his parents. The personal feelings of the son and his wife were secondary to their responsibility towards safeguarding the interests of the son's parents. The codes of the *li* contained clear instructions about it:

“[Sons and sons' wives] should go to their parents and parents-in-law [on the first crowing of the cock]. On getting to where they are, with bated breath and gentle voice, they should ask if their clothes are (too) warm or (too) cold, whether they are ill or pained, or uncomfortable in any part; and if so, they should proceed reverently to stroke and scratch the place. They should in the same way, going before or following after, help and support their parents in quitting or entering (the apartment). In bringing in the basin for them to wash, the younger will carry the stand and the elder the water; they will beg to be allowed to pour out the water, and when the washing is concluded, they will hand out the towel. They will ask whether they want anything, and then respectfully bring it. All this they will do with an appearance of pleasure to make their parents feel at ease...While the parents are both alive, at their regular meals, morning and evening, the (oldest) son and his wife

²⁵ *Kitáb-I-Aqdas*, verse 104 in “Questions and Answers”, p 138

will encourage them to eat everything, and what is left after all, they will themselves eat...

No daughter-in-law, without being told to go to her own apartment, should venture to withdraw from that (of her parent-in-law). Whatever she is about to do, she should ask leave from them. A son and his wife should have no private goods, nor animals, nor vessels; they should not presume to borrow from, or give anything to, another person. If any one give the wife an article of food or dress, a piece of cloth or silk, a handkerchief for her girdle, an iris or orchid, she should receive and offer it to her parents-in-law. If they accept it, she will be glad as if she were receiving it afresh. If they return it to her, she should decline it, and if they do not allow her to do so, she will take it as if it were a second gift, and lay it by to wait till they may want it.²⁶

No doubt nowadays, such archaic practices are rare. The son and his wife were required to live with his parents, owed absolute obedience to them, and had no independent property rights. Chinese literature is full of edifying stories about filial sons and daughters and daughters-in-law who were reputed to have sacrificed everything for the comfort and wellbeing of their parents.

Marriage, far from being a union between a man and a woman to satisfy personal desires, was primarily a family matter. The bride was chosen by the son's parents and usually, the couple would never have met before the wedding. Everything about the betrothal and wedding, including the religious sanctions, was calculated to reinforce the subordination of the young couple to the bridegroom's family, especially his parents.

The expensive gifts given to the bride's family emphasised that she was in fact being purchased by the boy's parents for their son. The matching of the horoscopes and the traditional belief that marriages were "made in heaven" gave an air of inevitability to decisions that actually were made

²⁶ *Li Ki*, book ten, pp 450f, 453, and 458

on hard-headed business or "political" considerations by parents and "go-betweens". Formal worship of the bridegroom's ancestors brought the bride under the supernatural authority of her husband's forefathers and reminded her that her membership in her natal lineage was terminated. She was now a probationer among the relatives of her husband, and both she and her husband were economically dependent on his parents. Only by earning the respect and tolerance of the parents could the new wife gain security in her role; thus filial conduct towards her parents-in-law was literally a matter of life and death. The institution of marriage is therefore used as a means to an end; the main purpose being to produce the male heir to perpetuate the family lineage.

In contrast, the Bahá'í view on marriage is more democratic, where love should dominate the marriage. It is also a spiritual union between the couple and believed to be a bond that lasts forever,

"Marriage, among the mass of the people, is a physical bond, and this union can only be temporary, since it is foredoomed to a physical separation at the close. Among the people of Bahá, however, marriage must be a union of the body and of the spirit as well, for here both the husband and wife are aglow with the same wine, both are enamoured of the same matchless Face, both live and move through the same spirit, both are illumined by the same glory. This connection between them is a spiritual one, hence it is a bond that will abide forever. Likewise do they enjoy strong and lasting ties in the physical world as well, for if the marriage is based both on the spirit and the body, that union is a true one, hence it will endure. If, however, the bond is physical and nothing more, it is sure to be only temporary, and must inexorably end in separation. When therefore, the people of Bahá undertake to marry, the union must be a true relationship, a spiritual coming together as well as a physical one, so that throughout every phase of life, and in all the worlds of

God, their union will endure; for this real oneness is a gleaming out of the love of God."²⁷

Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh declares the purpose of marriage should be to produce a new generation who will recognise Him, "enter into wedlock, O people, that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me and My servants"²⁸.

The Key Role of the Eldest Son

In the family religion, bearing children was regarded as essential to a couple's filial responsibilities, as said by Mencius, "There are three ways in which one may be unfilial, of which the worst is to have no heir."²⁹ Not to have an heir was a major offence to the family because without an heir the ancestral sacrifices would have to be discontinued. In cases where the wife cannot produce a son and a concubine does not bear a son, often a son from a close relative would be adopted as an heir. If there is more than one son, then the eldest would have to take over the responsibilities to the ancestors.

The eldest son has a special position. He is destined to replace the father as the head of the family. He is the principal sacrificiant to the ancestors. All the younger siblings have to pay him the same obedience and respect that they owed to the father. Thus the male descendant of the lineage has special status in the family tree as indicated in this passage:

"Eldest [male] cousins in the legitimate line of descent and their brothers should do reverent service to the son, who is the representative chief of the family and his wife. Though they may be richer and higher in official rank than he, they should not presume to enter his house with (the demonstrations of) their wealth and dignity... A

²⁷ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 117

²⁸ *Kitáb-I-Aqdas*, p 41

²⁹ *The Works of Mencius*, IVA.26.1.

wealthy cousin should prepare two victims, and present the better of them to his chief. He and his wife should together, after self-purification, reverently assist at his sacrifice in the ancestral temple. When the business of that is over, they may venture to offer their own private sacrifice."³⁰

Thus it is very important for the Chinese to have a male heir, as this is the means that the *tsu* will be perpetuated and the family name will be immortal and have continuity. It is commonly said that the father who has healthy sons and grandsons is quite satisfied and will die graciously at his deathbed. Understood in this way, the culminating acts of *li* are those of ancestor worship.

The Bahá'í Faith however, does not believe in progeniture. There are no elaborate rituals and customs specifically for showing respect to the eldest son and the ancestors. Social order for Bahá'ís comes from spiritual qualities and adherence to the divine laws as laid down by Bahá'u'lláh. However, in the Bahá'í writings, special mention is made of the role and responsibilities of the eldest son:

"In all the Divine Dispensations the eldest son hath been given extraordinary distinctions. Even the station of prophet hath been his birthright. With the distinctions given to the eldest son, however, go concomitant duties. For example, he has the moral responsibility, for the sake of God, to care for his mother and also to consider the needs of the other heirs."³¹

The Bahá'í writings indicate the importance of educating the children to know God early. If this is done, then respect and love of parents will follow. The responsibilities of children towards their parents derive from the appreciation of what their parents have done for them. Significantly,

³⁰ *Li Ki*, book ten, I.20, pp. 458f

³¹ *Kitab-I-Aqdas*, Note 44, p 186

the gratitude of the children towards their parents is a point of agreement between the Bahá'í Faith and Chinese tradition.

"The parents must exert every effort to rear their offspring to be religious, for should the children not attain this greatest of adornments, they will not obey their parents, which in a certain sense means that they will not obey God. Indeed, such children will show no consideration to anyone, and will do exactly as they please."³²

"Also a father and mother endure the greatest troubles and hardships for their children; and often when the children have reached the age of maturity, the parents pass on to the next world. Rarely does it happen that a father and mother in this world see the reward of the care and trouble they have undergone for their children. Therefore, children, in return for this care and trouble, must show forth charity and beneficence, and must implore pardon and forgiveness for their parents."³³

The Mutual Dependence of Dead and Living

The relationship of mutual dependence, with its expectation of tangible blessings in exchange for filial nourishment, may be said to describe the common attitude of the Chinese to the present. It involves a proper ceremonial funeral, burial in a grave auspiciously located according to the principles of *Feng-Shui*³⁴, a tablet reverently set up and regularly given

³² *Family Life*, p1

³³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette (USA), 1974, p 231

³⁴ This is usually called "geomancy" in Western writings and its literal meaning is "wind and water." *Feng-Shui* constitutes a system of divination for determining the auspicious siting of human dwellings - for the living or for the dead. See E J Eitel, *Feng-Shui: Principles of the Natural Science of the Chinese*, Trubner, Hong Kong and London, 1873, pp. 22f.

homage. There are also more formal rites and observances on special occasions. For all these demonstrations of the continuing love and remembrance of their descendants, the ancestors are believed to provide them with the sorts of things any parents would wish for their children: good luck, health, happiness, official position, wealth, sons, love of virtue, long life, and a peaceful death. The educated Chinese elite (the literati) has a less literal and more rationalistic belief:

“He sacrificed as if [the deceased] were present; he sacrificed [to the spirits] as if those spirits were present.”³⁵

“The Master did not discuss strange phenomena, feats of strength, disorders, or spirits.”³⁶

Chi Lu asked about serving the souls of the dead. The Master said, “Not being able [adequately] to serve [living] men, how can we serve the souls of the dead?” [The disciple then said,] “I venture to ask about death.” [The Master] said, “Not yet knowing about life, how can we know about death?”³⁷

These passages did not mean that Confucius did not believe in the supernatural. Confucius gave us many statements referring to Heaven, to the power of Heaven, and even to Heaven's protection and sponsorship of Confucius himself. He was regarded by later generations as the final authority on *li*, and the Analects³⁸ show that he took the ancestral rites very seriously.

However, the most explicit explanations of the ancestral rites are given by the philosopher, Master Hsun (c. 340 - 245). He said:

³⁵ *The Confucian Analects*, III.12.1.

³⁶ *The Confucian Analects*, VII.20.

³⁷ *The Confucian Analects*, XI.11.

³⁸ *The Confucian Analects*, XI.11.

"Within the sacrificiant there is an accumulation of thought about, and affectionate longing for, [the deceased]. Upon him come, all untimely, feelings of calamity, and gaspings for breath. Thus, while others are happy and harmonious, to the loyal subject and the filial son there come feelings of calamity. Those feelings which come upon him are deeply moving and, if they find no release, the accumulation of thoughts makes him feel frustrated and inadequate, and he is conscious that ritual has been deficient and incomplete. Therefore the Former Kings devised for this situation [sacrificial] texts expressing to the utmost veneration for the venerable and love for the parent. Hence I say the accumulation of thoughts about, and affectionate longing for, [the deceased] is the utmost degree of loyalty and faithfulness, of love and respect, and the full bloom of ritual and culture. Were it not for the Saints (i.e., those Former Kings) there could be no understanding of this. The Saints clearly understood them (i.e., the meaning and purposes of the sacrifices); military aristocrats and nobles carry them out serenely; officials consider they must be observed; while among the hundred surnames (i.e., the aristocratic families) they have become customary. To the noble man (i.e., the ideal man of Master K'ung's philosophy) they are a human way, while among the hundred surnames they are thought to be serving the souls of the dead."³⁹

Bahá'ís believe that first and foremost, one needs to look after one's own soul and develop spiritual qualities while still living in this world. There are no rites and no material sacrifices or offerings to be performed when Bahá'ís pray to the souls of the dead. Our prayers can assist the souls of our loved ones and our friends in the next world. But the effectiveness of the prayers depends on our sincerity. The Bahá'í concept of after-life includes the soul's journey towards God:

³⁹ see "Li Lun" by Hsun Tzu in Li Ki, Master Hsun, "*On Ritual*", translation by James Legge, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1885.

“And now concerning thy question regarding the soul of man and its survival after death. Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal His loving-kindness and bounty. The movement of My Pen is stilled when it attempteth to befittingly describe the loftiness and glory of so exalted a station. The honour with which the Hand of Mercy will invest the soul is such as no tongue can adequately reveal, nor any other earthly agency describe. Blessed is the soul which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the peoples of the world. Such a soul liveth and moveth in accordance with the will of its Creator, and entereth the all-highest Paradise. The Maids of Heaven, inmates of the loftiest mansions, will circle around it, and the Prophets of God and His chosen ones will seek its companionship. With them that soul will freely converse, and will recount unto them that which it hath been made to endure in the path of God, the Lord of all worlds. If any man be told that which hath been ordained for such a soul in the worlds of God, the Lord of the throne on high and of earth below, his whole being will instantly blaze out in his great longing to attain that most exalted, that sanctified and resplendent station...”⁴⁰

“The mysteries of which man is heedless in the earthly world, those will he discover in the heavenly world, and there will he be informed of the secrets of the truth; how much more will he recognise or discover persons with

⁴⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1978, p 155-56

whom he has been associated. Undoubtedly, the holy souls who find a pure eye and are favoured with insight will, in the kingdom of lights, be acquainted with all mysteries, and will seek the bounty of witnessing the reality of every great soul. They will even manifestly behold the beauty of God in that world. Likewise, will they find all the friends of God, both those of the former and recent times, present in the heavenly assemblage. The difference and distinction between men will naturally become realised after their departure from this mortal world. But this distinction is not in respect to place, but in respect to the soul and conscience. For the Kingdom of God is sanctified (or free) from time and place; it is another world and another universe. And know thou for a certainty that in the divine worlds the spiritual beloved ones will recognise one another, and will seek union with each other, but a spiritual union. Likewise, a love that one may have entertained for anyone will not be forgotten in the world of the Kingdom, nor wilt thou forget there the life that thou hadst in this material world."⁴¹

Family Bonds

The main characteristic and social contribution of the Family religion lies in its powerful unifying force. The family throughout 2,500 years of history has provided the moral and ethical basis to Chinese society. Mencius believed the family to be the fundamental unit of society. He said: "The root of the empire is in the state, and the root of the state is in the family."⁴² In his book called, *The Great Learning*, Mencius advocated that:

"In order rightly to govern the state, it is necessary first to regulate the family; in order to put the empire in peace

⁴¹ J. E Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1980, p 190

⁴² *The Book of Mencius*, IVA.5.

and prosperity, it is necessary first to regulate the state."⁴³

The orderly structure of the Chinese Family, uniform and homogeneous throughout China, is probably the major factor contributing to the long lasting nature of Chinese civilisation, the world's oldest continuous civilisation.

The Bahá'í Faith also comes to renew belief in the sacredness of family bonds and reaffirms the family institution. From the Bahá'í perspective, family bonds are essentially religious in nature. Family commitments are not separated from service to the Bahá'í Faith, or humanity as a whole. In fact, service to the family is considered to be a means by which a Bahá'í can contribute to the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh, addressing children, states:

"Beware lest ye commit that which would sadden the hearts of your fathers and mothers. Follow ye the path of Truth which indeed is a straight path. Should anyone give you a choice between the opportunity to render a service to Me and a service to them, choose ye to serve them, and let such service be a path leading you to Me. This is my exhortation and command to thee."⁴⁴

About Posterity and Immortality

The Chinese people's idea of posterity is based on the propagation of the family name. For them it is critical to continue the lineage passed down from the ancestors. The eldest son must at all costs have a healthy male heir to perpetuate the family surname, and the latter should carry on in the same tradition. If all this happens, then the father is satisfied that he has done his duty for family lineage continuity, immortality and posterity and he can grow old and die gracefully. In a sense he feels that he has fulfilled his earthly life mission of his forefathers. His soul will also be looked

⁴³ *The Great Learning*, translated by James Legge, 2d ed (Oxford, 1892), I.4.

⁴⁴ *Family Life*, p 2.

after. His children will continue praying and sacrificing to his family's dead souls, including his soul when he is dead.

The Bahá'í concept of posterity and immortality is based on looking after one's soul in this world and in the next world. In this earthly life, Bahá'ís must recognise the Station of Bahá'u'lláh and obey His laws. What we do in this life will affect our souls in the spiritual world.

“As to the soul of man after death, it remains in the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body, and after it is freed from the body it remains plunged in the ocean of God's mercy.”⁴⁵

Social Life

Regarding social life, the Chinese people essentially expanded or extended family life into a larger arena. This was an expansion of the practice of filial piety. In the Chinese community, kinship was formed through the marriage relationship, clans were established through blood relationship. The same respect demanded of children for their elders within the family was extended to apply to teachers, and other figures of social authority. The family hierarchy was translated into social ranking. Based on this traditional model alone, it is difficult for the Chinese people to assimilate and inter-penetrate other cultures, and vice-versa.

Bahá'í communities are less bound by kinship ties and social hierarchy. Instead, Bahá'ís are concerned with forging spiritual ties and the Bahá'í Faith is democratic in its system of administration. As a result, the Bahá'í Faith is able to attract and assimilate people from a wide range of different religious and racial backgrounds, and is not restricted to a particular family or ancestor. The wider loyalty inherent in the Bahá'í Faith may help to integrate the practitioners of the Chinese Family Religion to other cultures.

⁴⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 66

Conclusion

The Family religion's practices of filial piety and ancestor worship have made the Chinese people a very family oriented type of society. Its practitioners are generally focused on their families and are parochial in their outlook towards the world at large. The Family is all-important to them, and the principle that "blood is thicker than water" is very pervasive. For the Chinese people, the prosperity and immortality of a male individual meant the continuity of his family lineage and "surname". Women are treated less than equal and are valued only as the means to obtaining the male heir.

In a world that is becoming smaller and more integrated, the practices of the family religion are not easily understood or accepted outside Chinese communities. However, the reverence, respect and prayerful attitude shown by the Chinese people for their deceased has similarities to Bahá'í belief. The strong spiritual connection with the dead ancestors, albeit expressed through material and earthly sacrifices at appropriate anniversaries, is essentially in accord with the same sentiment expressed in many Bahá'í prayers. Also the gratitude which children are called upon to show their parents is common to both religions.

Ironically, in many parts of the world today, the family as an institution is under siege and breaking down, largely because of the influence of materialism and consumerism. Key aspects of the Chinese Family religion, such as respect, reverence and gratitude to elders, obedience of children to their elders, are still values which are required today.

The Bahá'í Faith extends the unity and bonds of the family religion to the human family. The role of the family is still vital to the stability and unity of society as a whole, but in the Bahá'í Faith it becomes an integral part of the global community. The survival of the Family religion depends on how much it can universalise its faith. This goal is poetically described by Bahá'u'lláh in the following way:

"We desire but the good of the world and happiness of the nations, yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment...That all nations should become as one in faith

and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled... what harm is there in this?... These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; but let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ J.E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, Bahá'u'lláh's words to E.G. Brown, p 40

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Purposeful Spiritual Endeavour: A Fundamental Connection between Bahá'ís and Christians

Colin Quin

Abstract

The need for a clearer, warmer, more purposeful connection between individuals of different religious Faiths is self-evident. For Christians and Bahá'ís there is a commonality in spiritual orientation, religious impulses and encounters, as well as personal commitment, that needs to be recognised. There is a comparable unfolding process at work in our individuality, inspiration, growth and service that needs to be acknowledged. We each have a similar concern with our own inescapable human needs, aspirations, religious devotion and expressiveness that needs to be respected.

We are challenged to a deeper understanding of the ideas we value as well as a deeper appreciation of each other. Fortunately there exist productive factors within spiritual inspired understanding that can facilitate, deepen, refine and regulate this worthwhile enterprise. The qualities of affinity, objectivity, fulfilment and empathy can operate in more developmental, resilient, reciprocal and genuine ways within us and between us. At the root source of understanding these dynamic virtues are its germinal inspiration. In the development of understanding they are its purpose and measure. In the outcome of understanding they are its fruit and presage of further progress.

Since the emphasis in this paper is on spiritual goodness and religious wisdom it is more of a contemplation than an exposition. It is an affirmation based upon the belief that, "*we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 3.18). It is based on the conviction that this cannot occur through arrogance, intolerance, exclusiveness or

pretentiousness, but through grace, faith, conscientious endeavour, and fruitful mutuality. It holds that, despite the waves and billows of human frustration, limitation, ambition, struggle, and interaction, "Deep calleth unto deep" (Psalm 42.7).

Dedication

"O God, My God!

**Aid Thou Thy trusted servants to have loving and tender hearts.
Help them to spread abroad amongst all the nations of the earth,
the light of guidance that cometh from the company on high.
Verily, Thou art the Strong, the Mighty, the All-Subduing, the Ever-
Giving. Verily, Thou art the Generous, the Gentle, the Tender, the
Most Bountiful."**

*'Abdú'l-Bahá*¹

"Most High, Glorious God!

**Enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me, Lord,
a correct faith, a certain hope, a perfect charity, sense and knowledge,
so that I may carry out Your holy and true command."**

*St. Francis*²

¹ *Bahá'í Prayers and Holy Writings, A Selection*, p 69

² St Francis, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 316.9

Introduction

Our brief is to discover the link between the Bahá'í Faith and the Christian Faith. We are both connected in the sense that we are both religions, concerned with spirituality, and we are both made up of individual human beings with similar concerns, problems, disappointments and aspirations. Of course, there are differences in doctrinal interpretation, ordinances and organisation. But are they all that insurmountable? How can we both as groups and in individual encounters initiate a fruitful, peaceful, productive relationship and mutual understanding? How can we avoid argumentativeness, annoyance, impatience, misunderstanding, and conceit? Obviously the answer is not magical or instantaneous: it can be better than that, it can be spiritual, gradual and developmental, pragmatic, beneficial and useful, authentic and actual.

These ideas are presented for your consideration based on the following conditions that we must ever hold primal. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1.20-21). Thus, not only must we be cautious of exclusivity in others, with regard to spiritual insight and religious outlook, we must be cautious of it within ourselves. It is only through a consultative approach that this can be overcome, and we need to keep faith with our own religious covenant and not follow after "feigned words (that) make merchandise of you" (II Peter 2:3). So it is incumbent on us to maintain a realistic, co-operative modesty with regard to any ideas expressed in religious dialogue.

Similarly, it should be borne in mind that: "A Bahá'í scholar...will not make the mistake of regarding the sayings and beliefs of certain Bahá'ís at any one time as being the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith is the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: His Own Words as interpreted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. It is a Revelation of such staggering magnitude that no Bahá'í at this early stage in Bahá'í history can rightly claim to have more than a partial and imperfect understanding of it"³. Yet also, "The House of Justice advises

³ The Universal House of Justice: *The Challenge and Promise of Bahá'í Scholarship*, Bahá'í World, XVII, pp 195-6

you not attempt to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take, or the approach that scholars should adapt. Rather you should strive to develop within your Association respect for a wide range of endeavours and approaches"⁴.

As a result, a challenge is laid upon us both. We need to be clear about, and yet resilient in, our reasons for and methods of associating with one another. What can we offer each other and the world? It is likely to be frustrating or counter-productive if one side or individual assumes he has the advantage and uses it as a platform for ego-centricity or an inconsiderate patronising implementation of his own slanted agenda. We need a lot of patience and perseverance. Our inspiration needs to be sure and adaptable. Our courage needs to be directed by stability within ourselves, and a sense of nurturing each other. It needs to have a cleansing refining effect on our characters, expectations and modes of communication in a reciprocal way. We need a sense of social affinity, resilient objectivity, reciprocal fulfilment and genuine empathy to release and develop the refining nature of religious spirituality in its endeavour for a more actualised purpose. We need to discover how it is that "We do the work, but God works in us the doing of the works"⁵.

1. Development Affinity

1.1 Through our common spiritual orientation

Both Christians and Bahá'ís have a common impulse to arrive at something higher than what material forms can offer.

"Know, O thou possessors of insight that true spirituality is like unto a lake of clear water which reflects the divine. Of such was the spirituality of Jesus Christ. There is another kind which is like a mirage, seeming to be spiritual when it is not. That which is truly spiritual must light the path to God, and must result in deeds. We cannot believe the call to be spiritual when there is no

⁴ *Scholarship, A Compilation*: Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, note 14

⁵ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, p 452:12

result. Spirit is reality, and when the spirit in each of us seeks to join with the Great Reality, it must in turn give life'⁶.

What qualities does a fresh, healthy lake have? It is contained, yet adaptable. It is cohesive, yet fresh and clear. It is cleansing and yet also refreshing. It is very useful, beneficial and practical, through both its individual characteristics and its integration into the world around it. From its face is reflected the sun, the moon, and the clouds, and the vast expanse of the sky, as well as the mountains and forest rising around it. On its surface is the play and sparkle of light and colour. Inner currents and outer winds, even storms, can move and shake its waters, yet it still rests easily on the earth's surface. Its fluid nature flows into lowly places, yet its depths are calm and peaceful. It is the home for a variety of life within it and around it. It is a source of nourishment, even for many things beyond its borders. Many creatures come regularly from long distances to partake of its bounty. A healthy lake has streams flowing into it from innocent springs, and a river, on its way to the sea, flowing out so men can irrigate their dry fields. It is interactive with the environment in which it exists. It is interactive with the sky and the earth through which it fulfils itself and gains meaning.

If religious spirituality cultivated and maintained these symbolic qualities in a purposeful, holistic and renewing way, all our endeavours would become more refined in their nature. The original, authentic inspiration and benign nature of Revealed Faith would, as a result, be much more available, accessible, actualised, and much more fulfilling to us all in a steady, ongoing, progressive way. This implies that our efforts be interactive and moderated by a consultative process and diversified dynamic contained within a covenantal ethic. Our faith needs to be more than a faith against certain things; it needs to be a faith in, and for, the inevitable fairness of spiritual reality. It needs to allow the full potential of our spiritual principle to operate more easily, more joyously, more co-operatively.

We share a common purpose, in that we are instinctively seeking fulfilment through becoming more refined in our characters, attitudes, values, and relationships. We have turned this urge into a co-operative endeavour by aligning ourselves with religion. This connection between us is more

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p 107

fundamental than any differences of explanation or expression. It reveals the benign nature and inspiration of our own motivations. It reveals our hopes for mutual encouragement and enrichment, maturing goodness and a continuous reliable quickening. It reveals our desire for a profound and subtle yet substantial and unfolding regeneration. We have obviously realised that physical things depend ultimately on spiritual things, and not the opposite. This shared awareness is very hopeful, since it means that our outer efforts can become more adaptable and our motivations more agreeable with each other.

Most religions have a common theme. It is the desire and need to make contact with God, as defined by our status as creatures, and to be shown by Him through creation and revelation the path on earth that can lead to greater freedom, health, prosperity, and wisdom. This must primarily occur on spiritual levels to be of lasting value. Thus, at its core, religion can be seen to be profoundly practical in its purpose to lead mankind to greater efficiency, happiness, achievement, fulfilment, inner and outer peace, and sublime affinity and benefit. These are the things that every individual wants and searches for. We have made these aspirations our goals in life. We need to help each other in achieving these ambitions. They show the essential oneness of our humanity. The reward of living in society is that each person can derive benefits from every other person's efforts. Each person contributes a little, and then receives the vast benefits of society's accomplishments. Not only in material terms, but also in terms of collective wisdom and spiritual truth it can be experienced in many ways. The saints and sages of all religions have declared that they have drawn their wisdom from a sublime universal source, and that this source is full of unbounded justice, mercy, love, wisdom and joy.

Even though individual religions, like different nations and cultures, have unique characteristics, these are only the surface aspects. The fundamental principles at their heart are universal and everlasting. For this reason, the letter of the law or surface meanings, are not as integral as the spirit of the law which is far more invigorating. All religious teachings have their bases in the belief that there is an Unfathomable Spirit which sustains us even when we are not aware of it. We live by a deeper power than any set of propositions can provide. This power creates and supports all the functions of life. Every act of good, no matter how small is a radiation of that divinity. The blessings of life that this Singular Creative Being provides are deeper than what can be

appreciated by the senses or understood by the mind. Thus, it is only in our souls that our lives can be susceptible to the Eternal Spirit. It is from here that we derive our true strength. In the innermost sanctuary of our being we can discover our steadfastness and accord beyond all the displays of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and humiliation, confidence and confusion that we experience in life. Religions have ever sought to answer this universal human need in the context of the time and cultures in which they have appeared.

Thus, Bahá'ís believe that all the benign and spiritually inspiring Faiths of the world occurred, not only as man's intrinsic religious response to his existence but also as God's reciprocal response to the perennial nature and needs of humanity, and that "Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it appeared"⁷. Hence, for example, the greater restriction on divorce implemented by Christ at a time when Jewish family life and national stability were being undermined by Róman influences. Hence also, the later lifting by the early apostles of the necessity for circumcision as the gospel spread to the gentile world. Since that time Christianity has shown a remarkable ability to adapt to the norms and needs of varying minorities, cultures and historical events. However, this has not been without conflict, division, misunderstandings and denominational variety, albeit there has been a continuous repetition of revivalistic influences within all its organisational expressions, and this has contributed to its worldwide spread. The Bahá'í Faith, also, faces similar challenges to adapt to different cultures, races, classes of society, backgrounds, needs and problems, without compromising its essential covenant of unity. This creates many paradoxes, which Bahá'ís must work through with sensitivity, common sense, spiritual commitment, profound guidance, and inspired perseverance.

No great undertaking is possible without a willing, co-operative, persistent, creative, nurturing, steady, stable, consistent, and co-ordinated enterprise. We will have to uncover renewing and invigorating patterns of order and growth within our religious impulses to grow in our usefulness to mankind. Inner regeneration is the prerequisite to translating religious ideals into social benefit. All success in life is the result of putting our attention, energies and virtues into the appropriate channels and allowing a timely growth to occur. Working with a divided mind or purpose almost always gives results that are

⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 81

less than hoped for. One of the fullest, most insightful, most federating expressions of religious motivation is seen in loving relationships between people. The world is nourished by kindly wisdom, loving concern, forgiveness, sharing, and by great sacrifice. Christians and Bahá'ís cannot escape this great truth. A universal human spiritual transformation needs to be individually experienced first. Then an overflow of loving concern needs to occur in our undertakings. Divisiveness within and between individuals is almost always a cause of unnecessary friction, that is, unless it provides space for a common unifying factor to emerge.

1.2 Through our unfolding social function

What is obvious, is that the age in which we live has influences at work on a more global, interactive, confrontational level than was experienced even 200 years ago. The Industrial Revolution, political revolutions, technological, scientific, and social revolutions are, in fact, still rapidly changing the way we live. The world seems smaller. Cultures, religions, economies, nations influence each other whether they want to or not. And never before in history have religions been so socially close to each other. Both Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith rank amongst the most widespread of all religions in the world⁸. There are Christians and Bahá'ís in almost every nation on earth. Although the Bahá'í Faith only numbers about 5 million, its appearance in diverse places and situations such as the island of Samoa, a village in New Guinea, a city like Tokyo or New York, the wastes of Arctic Iceland point to its universal appeal and adaptability. It is clear then, that the arena of expression in which Christians and Bahá'ís find themselves, to which all those who call themselves children of God belong, and at this time in history, owe their loving contribution to, is this planet, this earth, this one world with all its inhabitants.

That Bahá'ís and Christians will have to learn to understand, respect and appreciate each other is essential for social harmony and peace, ever more so now as we snowball into the future towards the inevitable experience of the globalisation of mankind. This concerns both Christians and Bahá'ís since "Christ was a divine Centre of unity and love. Whenever discord prevails

⁸ see David R. Barret, 'Religion: World Religious Statistics', 1988 Britannica Book of the year, p 303

instead of unity, wherever hatred and antagonism take the place of love and spiritual fellowship, Antichrist reigns instead of Christ"⁹. This century has shown that the possibility of oppressive forces using prejudice and hostility as instruments of control has not diminished. Concern for love, and the healing of antagonism is, consequentially, enjoined on Bahá'ís and Christians as inescapable duty, and intrinsic need.

These statements appear in the Bahá'í Writings: "The Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is the same as the Cause of Christ. It is the same temple and the same foundation. Both of these are spiritual spring times and seasons of the soul-refreshing awakening and the cause of the renovation of the life of mankind"¹⁰; "Gird up the loins of your endeavour, O people of Bahá that haply the tumult of religious dissension and strife that agitateth the peoples of the earth may be stilled, that every trace of it may be obliterated... Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction"¹¹; "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"¹²; "He hath lent a fresh impulse, and set a new direction, to the birds of men's hearts, and hath obliterated every trace of restriction and limitation from God's holy book"¹³. As the Bible says: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!" (Isaiah 52.7)

Peace can come about only as a result of concern and understanding for others. Negotiations and agreements are simply the superficial manifestation of this deep concern and active understanding. We must look toward deeper, more lasting feelings of friendliness, courtesy, warmth, compassion,

⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 7

¹⁰ *Bahá'í References to Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, p 36

¹¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 288

¹² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 95

¹³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 96

sympathy, empathy, fairness, tolerance between people - and in this case, between individual Bahá'ís and individual Christians. To both Christians and Bahá'ís Christ speaks: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." (Matthew 5.9) This is the spiritual, moral and ethical basis for our relationship. We can be loyal to our religious convictions and commitments without being smug or bigoted. Fanaticism, superstition, dogmatism, pettiness and prudery are, after all, simply artificial attempts to manufacture a religious experience and spiritual purpose. Similarly, apathy, obtuseness, vacillation, naive gullibility, and grandiose claims are plainly superficial responses to religious endeavour and spiritual whole-heartedness. In religious dialogue, for instance, we cannot effectively claim to have access to wisdom and at the same time, display intolerance and insincerity.

Every human has some degree of affiliation and affinity with others. As a person goes through life, this connectedness is put to many tests. Yet by understanding the more sublime teachings of religion, a person can find the faith he needs for this inter-personal link to endure beyond, and rise above, hardships, grievances or misunderstandings. More than a passing glance at scriptures or people's foibles is necessary to achieve this level of understanding. Acts of prayer, meditation, faith, forgiveness, and often, sacrifice, are needed to provide us with the stamina that allow sympathy for our fellow man to become an abiding part of our lives, of our being. When many more of us attain to this type of faith and deeper affinity, the expression of relatedness will be more spontaneous, more widespread as are the ties that link family members together, despite the disagreements, negotiations, and consultation that members of a family sometimes need to go through.

The Golden Rule is the cornerstone of religious understanding as applied to human relationships. The majority of the scriptural teachings on human interaction are simply variations or reflections of, or subsidiary derivations from the Golden Rule. Trying to live by it in attitude and action automatically evokes the expression of all these other principles. It is the most concise and all-embracing expression of all the other principles. It has been taught by all the founders of every major religion as the surest way for human beings to arrive at a more workable relationship with others. Jesus said, "...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." (Matthew 7.12) He calls this the straight and narrow gate in the following verse and suggests that most people ignore even

this simple instruction on how to live. He further implies that it is one of the tests to determine whether men are false prophets since such are more preoccupied with greed and aggression than with equity. In the Bahá'í Writings it is expressed so: "Tell the loved ones of God that equity is the most fundamental among human virtues. The evaluation of all things must needs depend on it"¹⁴; observe equity in your judgement, ye men of understanding heart. He that is unjust in his judgements is destitute of the characteristics that distinguish man's station"¹⁵; "be fair to yourselves and to others, that the evidences of justice may be revealed through your deeds"¹⁶; lay not on any soul a load which ye would not to be laid on you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourselves. This is my best counsel unto you, did ye but observe it"¹⁷.

We are in such a hurry to change the world, that instead of working progressively on ourselves with each others' help, we sometimes become nuisances, hassling others and accosting them with our enthusiasm. We forget however "That the heart is the throne in which the Revelation of God the All-Merciful is centred"¹⁸. Hearts are not won or nurtured by imposition, strident posturing, vehement agitations, or meddling interference. Any new life, in this age, must needs stir first within people, and this is accomplished by our first paying attention with great humility to the destiny and virtues with which we ourselves have been endowed. Example has ever been a more direct form of persuasion than words, which are only signposts. We need to be careful that we do not create a situation again where people cry for the world to be saved from all the people who think that they can save it.

1.3 Through our inescapable human need

Nevertheless we have our limitations. We are not all, at any one time, highly cultured or clever. Sometimes we are clumsy and ignorant, but surely we all have the capacity to bear with each other in gentleness. We can be moderate,

¹⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 203

¹⁵ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 204

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p 278

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p 128

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p 186

yet far-sighted. We can be appreciative, yet balanced and resolute. Relationships, possibly even more so those based on idealistic, religious or spiritual considerations, have their highs and lows, ups and downs, forward and backward moments. We can work at remaining consistent and persistent with each other. We can encourage each other to maintain faith and joy. We can help each other mature, develop and grow. We can leave dubious impulses and ulterior motives behind without fear - they don't work in the long term anyway. We can give up being pompous or artificial, and learn that nobility is discovered in service to mankind and God. We can learn to relax into the spiritual abundance within both the Christian tradition and Bahá'í Faith, without losing sight of the patience, determination and steadfastness that an ongoing process of developmental understanding requires. We can be high minded, yet realistic. "For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, and righteousness and truth." (Ephesians 5.9) "Where people are praying for peace the cause of peace is being strengthened by their very act of prayer, for they are themselves becoming immersed in the spirit of peace"¹⁹.

Most surely we all have inadequacies, but this duty to understand one other should not be dismissed, neglected, or abandoned, "No one should abandon duties because he sees defects in them. Every action, every activity is surrounded by defects as a fire is surrounded by smoke"²⁰. Our faith can give us the assurance that God wants us to move into a greater goodness, and supports us and sustains us in this endeavour, despite our limitations and failures. Surely it is more righteous to dissolve theological bickerings, religious squabbles, and personal prickliness, than to maintain them. We are capable of accepting a greater goodness without fear or guilt, laxity or shabbiness.

Any kind of worthwhile association, begins with a positive attitude, a friendly mood, an affinity, a rapport and an uplifting-ambiance. It is this cultivation of mood that is fundamental and foundational, basic and necessary, before questions of doctrine or opinion can ever be approached; otherwise we do not end up teaching our respective Faiths, we end up proselytising with many negative side-effects. We must acknowledge and respect the spiritual potential of ourselves and spiritual identity of the other person. We must be convinced, even just a little, that we are somehow sincerely and genuinely one in our

¹⁹ John Macquarrie, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 313.5

²⁰ Bhagavad Gita, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 253.9

desire to understand God's purposes. Nobody looks through the same eyes or thinks with the same brain. We all have unique and different perspectives. We need each other. Without that other person's perspective one piece of the divine puzzle, one star in the universe of understanding is missing. If we are not willing to listen to others why should they listen to us? If we dismiss their concerns and doubts, why should they take us seriously? As the Buddha is reputed to have said: "Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule"²¹. We have the ability to arouse various emotions in each other so we must select carefully.

Whenever there is tension or squabbling between individuals, groups, or nations, it means that a time of mutual understanding has been neglected or lost. It means that the channels of communication have not been used or are broken. Affinity is a unifying, federating force. It radiates inwardly and outwardly in a determined, persevering yet flexible manner to deliberately and adaptably resolve disruptions and contentions, and differences between people and nations. In some circles, compromise is such a dirty word that the tendency is to be stiff-necked rather than conciliatory. Compromise is sometimes viewed as a sign of weakness, cowardice, and treachery instead of the unavoidable necessity, that it is. It takes more sacrifice and courage to modify one's position and moderate one's actions to considerably incorporate others than to stamp our feet and defend our corner at any cost to ourselves and others. Civilisation is based on the notion that some conformity, within fair and reasonable bounds, is inescapable and beneficial. For example, economics is established on the reality of bargaining towards an agreeable benefit and cost. Yet in our personal affairs we often don't seem very willing to be beneficial or productive, economical or civilised. We imagine that we are being used. What is wrong with being useful? Our unique qualities and contributions need not be dissolved or lost by being integrated into a greater whole which allows them to be made even more useful and beneficial.

A sense of affinity can conquer before there is fighting. Even if yelling and accusations break out, they can be contained before they lead to attack and betrayal. Even if the channels of communication break down, one should still aim for a reestablishment of accord. It is obvious that peace between people cannot solely be brought about by signatures on a piece of paper. Since the

²¹ quoted in *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 225.2

beginning of recorded history, tens of thousands of peace treaties have been signed between people. Clearly, treaties alone cannot sustain the peace between people, any more than a marriage certificate can sustain love in a marriage. It begins in the heart, flows out from there, and returns there. This is a lesson that we have to be convinced of and to learn finally and absolutely, albeit developmentally and through trial. It is time to look forward to more central, more grounded, deeper, more lasting feelings of peace and affinity in ourselves and between people. This peace and affinity must be raised in the home of our hearts. This is where a religious experience, such as Bahá'ís and Christians claim to have, comes in. It is nourished by a personal relationship with God, even if it is a limited acquaintance due to our createdness and human limitations. We must begin with what we have and where we are. A sense of harmony with the Source of life, and life's meaning, purpose, and function can help enormously in our efforts to attain a workable harmony with every other aspect of reality, especially other people.

Christians and Bahá'ís have so much to share that it seems ridiculous that we try to avoid it. High-minded religious people have a common aim of pragmatic concern. As Jesus said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matthew 25.40) We stand accountable before Christ and God in this regard. Many issues await our consultation and cooperation. Problems of racism, crime, human rights, poverty, illiteracy, prejudice, disease, neglect of children and the elderly, community care and interaction, injustice to women, the environment, war, to mention just a few, await our humane endeavours. If this is a social gospel, so be it. It is hypocritical to talk to a hungry man about the love of God, if it is in our means to give him bread. It would make our religious claims fraudulent. We need to effect a revolutionary change in our hearts and attitudes. As Jesus said, "...where your treasure is, there will your heart be also..." (Matthew 6.21)

2. Resilient Objectivity

2.1 Towards our common religious impulses

Our purpose is to know and love God, develop our characters and relationships to our full capacity. We participate in Grace through faith, and

share it with the world in the spirit of graciousness. When we meet those whose opinions differ from our own, we need not turn our face from them, or allow difference of opinion or diversity of thought to separate us from our fellow-men, or to be the cause of dispute and strife in our hearts. To understand is to approach, appreciate, accommodate, and apply the insights and illuminations absorbed into our consciousness, and awakened within our being. Thus, are we transformed and developed to higher levels of intelligence, a deeper sense of existence, more profound sensitivity, and subtle effectiveness. And all this according to our capacity and the degree of accord experienced. Any religious understanding or connection cannot solely begin and end with words. It must be more realistic, more substantial, more dynamic than that to claim authenticity, validity or actuality. As Albert Einstein said: "Of course understanding of our fellow beings is important. But this understanding becomes fruitful only when it is sustained by sympathetic feeling in joy and sorrow"²².

There are obvious facets of understanding, whether it be understanding ourselves and others, or understanding concepts of reality, or notions of spirituality and religion, that are needed to act as centering and grounding agents. Intelligence has an inductive component as well as a deductive one. It needs to be sensible and sensitive, as well as reasonable and intuitive. It needs to be motivational and ethical, as well as devotional and mystical. It needs to address both social and psychological wellbeing, as it is related to spirituality. It needs to meet individual and collective spiritual needs and aspirations. It needs to be useful in regulating, furthering, integrating and refining our attitudes and endeavours. It is a means more than an end; a direction more than a destination. Understanding, as such, participates in the greater notion of 'conscious being'. Our task is to participate efficiently, effectively and holistically in this process as stewards. Religious understanding is, therefore, that face of human awareness that turns towards the concept of the All-Embracing, All-Pervasive Impelling Motive Force of reality, of which consciousness and being are emanations. In a spiritual sense, it is the need for some glimpse of God's Active Providence and a taste of the enduring substantially of the Ground of Being, and so a perspective of our part in, and contribution to, the overall scheme of things. We can then live our human lives, with all the accompanying tasks, in the liberating and restful certainty

²² quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 431.3

than nothing in the world can separate God's love from us unless we alone grant the permission.

If all phenomena are viewed as constituting a divine creation, then human understanding generally can be viewed as a religious endeavour and spiritual effort. It is also a very humane enterprise, if we use it to examine the holiness and healthiness of our own respective religious commitments, in relation to ourselves as individuals, and each other as community. For Bahá'ís and Christians, this is especially interesting and crucial in view of the revolutionary social and psychological factors that are seeking expression and resolution in this historical age. That we, as Bahá'ís or Christians, repudiate each other, or ignore each other, is becoming more and more morally unacceptable. There is also the required service to mankind that our respective Writings demand of us both. This is because religious understanding needs to be an intelligent and sensitive, intuitive and sensible connection with people, ideas, feelings, situations and events, with human personality and character and outlook, with the world and its history; with time and space, as well as the Measureless and Enduring. It springs from, is based on and nourished by, developed and impelled by, a belief, faith and trust in the Ineffable Essence and God's Radiant Providence. It is a surrender and commitment to the intrinsic, inescapable, holistic, educational, and ultimately gracious and ennobling attributes of God's Infinite Dignity and Eternal Generosity, and that must ultimately occur beyond definitions or argumentativeness since "God is not what you imagine or what you think you understand. If you understand you have failed"²³.

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: "...the Reality of Divinity is holy above all understanding. The pictures of Divinity that come to our mind are the product of our fancy; they exist in the realm of our imagination. They are not adequate to the Truth; Faith in its essence cannot be put into words... the Divinity which man can understand is partial; it is not complete. Divinity is Actual Truth and Real Existence, and not any representation of it. Divinity Itself contains all, and is not contained"²⁴. Yet a trust in the Ineffability of God and His Providence is not a heaven-sent excuse for indolence or despair, nor a way of by-passing responsibility with regard to social, material or physical needs and

²³ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 431

²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p 22

concerns. As a consequence of this belief in God's unsearchable wisdom, we have to take up the challenge of laying bare any gems that lie hidden in the mine of our true and inmost selves, of carrying forward the civilising process in the world. We have to take on the situations and affairs God sends us, or places in our way, knowing that they come from Him and must be steered back to Him.

Understanding, therefore, as a growing process must in some ways be ennobling, satisfying and fulfilling, resourcefully enriching, unifying and integrating, integral and sensitising, balancing and moderating, developmentally purposeful, and decisively inspirational - in its means and ends, at its root and in its fruit, in its process and outcomes. With these fundamental qualities, our insights and outlook can become more essentially religious and necessarily spiritual, being more mature and humane in their manner, measure and message. Religious teachings are then able to be living waters for thirsty souls. The heaven of understanding with its luminaries of consultation, compassion, tolerance, and righteousness can be reflected from the mirror-like surface of our receptive hearts. Religious teachings need to be alive and refreshing, regenerating and enlivening, fluidly adaptable and relevant and applicable to life. As Jesus said; "If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7.38). His metaphor of water contains allusions to all the necessary qualities of religious heartiness and interaction.

Surely, we can agree that purpose of religion is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world, and it should not be made the cause of dissension and strife. It should safeguard the interests, and promote the unity of the human race, and foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men as direct result of an individual spiritual regeneration and shared religious transformation. It must put an end to religious strife and establish a bond of connection between the hearts of men. People who are willing to come together in attitudes of intelligence, illumination, spirituality, sincerity, truthfulness contribute to the welfare of mankind, and are instrumental in establishing happiness and righteousness. Tolerance and compassion heal the sorrow and grief in human hearts. It cleanses prejudice and fanaticism. We are missing the mark if we denounce the idea of fellowship. Our shame and guilt is only healed by the God of kindness, justice and mercy, by way of our

authentic and actual response. Our waywardness and folly can only be healed by the breaths of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit of wholeness. God does not exist for our ambitions, or for our imposition on, or interference with others. We can open our hearts to believe that His Will is the freely chosen, organic unity of the individual and collective soul. To be sure our approach and appeal can become extremely idealistic and at times sentimental - but understandably so. We need to appeal to more than the head. We need to soften our cynicism.

On the other hand, we need a personal and instinctive wariness of rigid, static, categorical, dogmatic modes of thinking, especially as religion cannot help but use language. Language is more connotative, situational, psychological, and functional than traditional theologies sometimes seem to consider. Hence, the need for, and use of, parables, symbols, metaphors, and ordinances by God's Messengers that contain and convey grounding significances and centering principles, multilayered allusions, unlocking the potential of receptive hearts through their grace. "Divine things are too deep to be expressed by common words. The heavenly teachings are expressed in parable in order to be understood and preserved for ages to come. When the spiritually minded dive deep into the ocean of their meaning they bring to the surface the pearls of their inner significance. There is no greater pleasure than to study God's word with a spiritual mind"²⁵, "The Spirit breathing through the Holy Scriptures is food for all who hunger"²⁶. As the Bible says: "... they are spiritually discerned..." (1 Corinthians 2.14) As Jesus explains: "Unto what is the kingdom of God like? and whereunto shall I resemble it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and cast into his garden, and it grew and waxed a great tree, and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it... It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened." (Luke 13.18-21) All of these inspired words teach us that religious teachings are subtle, profound, organic and developmental. They must work themselves from the inside out; from the simple towards the vast, from the easy towards the great. We can allow the formless, intangible influence of the Holy Writings to inspire us all and flow easily through us like breath; surprising, sublime and supernal in their effects.

²⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p 78

²⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 57

2.2 Towards our unfolding individuality

Religious teachings must have a pragmatic consequence upon our attitudes. We often have so much concern about what might happen, that what is actually happening passes almost unnoticed. Religion asserts that God is Ever-Present. "Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? ... Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139.7, 23-24), "for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." (1 Corinthians 2.10) Our lives are often trying to tell us something, but often we don't have time to listen. We are more afraid of voicing our complaints to God, not out of fear of disrespect, but out of fear for the remedies that might be suggested to our conscience. Nevertheless, in this place of open-heartedness to the Spirit of God at work in us individually, several things become clear. One is that God's Spirit is at work in all spiritually-minded, spiritually-discerning people; that while we have been living our lives others have been living theirs. Also, that it is patently absurd to expect that we'll always stay on good terms so long as they are simply one's own. Moreover, in order to get from what was to what will be, we must go through what is, that the only difference between yesterday and tomorrow is today, that unless we move, the place where we are is the place where we will always be. Are we still waiting for the world to atone for all our real or imagined grievances and unfulfilled expectations? Are we still disgruntled over the fact that nobody has ever loved us, the way we think everybody should love us? This is the malaise that haunts us all, and its healing is not always obtained in one day. We must make an effort to connect with others despite our shared inadequacies.

Individually, we are free to take charge of our lives. We can be more decisive. We are free to make choices, modifications, adaptations, connections, based on our own personal standpoints and experiences, but our having to explain or justify every conceptual reference or empirical link in our thinking or motivations is quite disheartening. We need time and space to heal and grow. There are strong affective and intuitive motivations in our thoughts which would be disturbing, disruptive and counter-productive to remove. However, they are still only our thoughts and feelings. We can do with them as we think best suits our growth-situation and benign creative insights. After all is said and done, religious understanding's aim is not to have us primarily remember a

whole lot of information. It is to nurture attitudes and values, and stimulate a sense of alertness, awareness and spiritual devotion and motivation in ourselves, and if it proves useful to others as well, so be it. It needs to cultivate habits and skills, and produce practical benefit, and blessings. We do not need to propose a new dogma - we can add, subtract, rephrase, and, most of all, extract and refashion what suits the spiritual purposes of our lives. This is as long as we do not impose our perspectives and predilections on others as the core representation of our Covenantal Religion. They are simply our developing responses to It. Nevertheless, it is towards a sense of community that we are aiming, so it is helpful if our thoughts are lofty, far-reaching, and non-aggressive, so that there can be an overflow of blessings to others and the world around us. One of the most satisfactory things in life is to have been able to give a large amount of ourselves to others whether it be by sharing or adapting. We can welcome other viewpoints without being upset, tossed about, or destabilised.

"Religion... is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs; religion is the teachings of the Lord God, teachings which constitute the very life of humankind, which urge high thoughts upon the mind, refine the character, and lay the groundwork for man's everlasting honour... And this is clear: 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 mighty inflow of the Word of God"²⁷.

As the Bible explains: "Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm" (1 Timothy 1.5-7); "... receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth

²⁷ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 52-3

there in, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." (James 1.21-27). Real religion is often just ordinary, uneventful goodness, received by God's grace and returned to Him through kindness and humility. Thus it is not necessary for it to be flashy. It already glows in our hearts.

It is the heart of man that grows in its capacity to know God and which God seeks to possess not by authoritarian force but by embracing and unfolding love, and awakening, pervasive light. It is from this central point that our latent potential bursts into life. As the Bible explains: "For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness? (1 Corinthians 4.20-21); "Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ... written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart. And such trust have we through Christ to Godward. Not that we are sufficient unto ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God. Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament, not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3.3-6).

Doctrines and rules are tools, aids and signposts. Like the sabbath, they were made for man, not man for them. They are not whips, chains or prisons. "For the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. For meat destroy not the work of God." (Romans 14.17-20). For Christ "having made peace through the blood of His Cross by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself, by Him, I say, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven." (Colossians 1.20) This peace with God and from God, on earthly and heavenly levels is what we nurture and hold in trust. The Bahá'í writings explain: "Know thou that when the Son of Man yielded up His breath to God, the whole creation wept with a great weeping. By sacrificing Himself,

however, a fresh capacity was infused into all created things"²⁸; "Jesus Christ gave His life upon the cross for the unity of mankind"²⁹; "Jesus Christ sought to create this love in the hearts. He suffered all difficulties and ordeals that perchance the human heart might become a fountain source of love"³⁰; "Christ endured a life of sorrow, pain and grief, to bring a perfect example of love into the world -and in spite of this we continue to act in a contrary spirit one towards another"³¹. In the bible are we instructed: "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ...that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and in nothing terrified by your adversaries" (Phillipians 1.27-28)

2.3 Towards our inescapable aspirations

This unified steadfastness, enterprise, and courage begins in the heart. As Jesus said: "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! or Lo there! for behold the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17.20-21). Bahá'u'lláh elaborates: "The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath ever regarded, and will continue to regard the hearts of men as His own, His exclusive possession. All else, whether pertaining to land or sea, whether riches or glory, He hath bequeathed unto the kings and rulers of the earth"³². This is why He declares "Who can ever believe that this servant of God hath at any time cherished in His heart a desire for earthly honour or benefit? The cause associated with His Name is far above the transitory things of this world"³³; "By the righteousness of God! It is not our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men. Upon them are the eyes of Bahá fastened. To this testifieth the kingdom of Names, could ye but comprehend it"³⁴. As Jesus also declared: "My Kingdom is not of this world." (John 18.36)

²⁸ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 85

²⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 5

³⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 15

³¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 121-2

³² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 202

³³ *ibid.*, p 85

³⁴ *ibid.*, p 212

Any theocratic hopes or millennial faith we have must arise not from tradition, subversion, imitation, oppression, or the arbitrariness and legislations of oligarchies or vested interests who assume power without diplomatic and humane responsibility. A divine civilization can only come from the collective willingness and collaborative liberty of humane souls. It must begin with, and in, and be sustained by and through, the Spirit at work within us individually, freely and fairly. The heart needs to be ready to receive the vibrating influence of a renewing, inner spiritual order and vitality before it can blossom outwardly. The soul of man needs first to be revolutionised through the agency of the Holy Spirit in all Its wonder, uniqueness and systematic transformative power. We need to allow our own equilibrium to be upset first by the demands of inner accord before ever any outer concord can said to be authentic, actual, or durable.

The Messiah rules the mundane affairs of men through the iron rod of a tempered character; and measures the city, gates, and towers of hearts with the golden rod of the Spirit. Any peace within us, between us, and around us, needs to be the ever-widening ripples of "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding (which) shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Phillipians 4.7). We are enjoined to "let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful." (Colossians 3.15). To this did Jesus refer when He said: "Peace, I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you.." (John 14.27). However this holds a promise and responsibility, "Nevertheless we, according to his promise look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless." (2 Peter 13-14) Any peace among the people of the world, between us now; any progress or outer renewal begins inside us, "...peace must first be established among individuals, until in the end it leadeth to peace among nations... strive ye with all your might to create through the power of the word of God, genuine love, spiritual communion and durable bonds among individuals"³⁵.

For Bahá'ís or Christians to call themselves Bahá'ís or Christians is not enough. Their inmost being must become ennobled and enlightened, as well as

³⁵ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 246

humbled and warmly softened through living a Bahá'í or Christian life. The Bible tells us to beware of, "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away" (2 Timothy 3.5); "But thou, O man of God, flee these things, and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness" (1 Timothy 6.11); "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it" (Psalm 127.1). Inner truth is the basis for outer reality. Our inner life is the basis for outer activity and our reaction to circumstances, and response to external events. No one thinks in our minds but us. No one feels in your heart but you. No one chooses God but ourselves individually. As John Donne said: "Christ beats His drum, but He does not press men, Christ is served with volunteers"³⁶. Sadly, man's inhumanity to man; witch-hunts, persecutions, concentration camps, inquisitions, martyrdoms, book burnings, slander and defamation, make us all mourn, and disillusion many. It is liberty of conscience, sanctuary and privacy, that are the necessary concomitants of cooperation and unity. An unfettered, free, fair, individual search for truth, and investigation of reality, is the first step towards having a decent, realistic, healthy, holy religion. Integrity and sincerity, fairness and justice, tolerance and accountability, can never be eliminated from sanctity. Thus, of patience, faith, and practicality do we require a lot. For "Faith is a living and unshakeable confidence, a belief in the grace of God, so assured that a man would die a thousand deaths for its sake"³⁷.

We are stuck with the influences and tensions of our respective histories and distinctive individual outlook, the needs of the present world situation, and our concerns for, and beliefs about, the future. We can be proud of the nobler aspects of our respective heritages, and can be committed to keeping that legacy alive for the benefit of future generations. We can gain a greater objectivity of the initiating impulses that dynamised our religions, and have a greater vision of the road ahead.

Thus any ideas or teachings, whether humanly or divinely inspired, are more like springboards than toll-gates. Religious ordinances are not to be equated with civil laws even if they are similar, for the former is the prerogative of a maturing spiritual conscience, and the latter serves basic social necessity and

³⁶ quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 166.8

³⁷ Martin Luther, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 177.6

mundane secular considerations. Religious ideas are brought to the measure and test by being spiritual guidelines for a more spiritual, voluntary religious life. "No one doth well what he doth against his will"³⁸. It is, thus, not complete agreement from others that we must individually desire, rather more sympathy with our motives and a mutual ethical impulse. That others will discover some naive presumptions, untested assumptions, or even inadequacy in us is highly likely. We can let them take what they can and leave the rest, while mutually remaining committed to God, and our fundamental responsibility to humanity and history. We can be wise enough to stay committed to our humanity and existence. We can be gracious and still be committed to a valid, viable, genuinely spiritual future and authentically realised unfolding destiny.

Christians and Bahá'ís need to have enough faith in God to give Him, themselves, each other, and other human beings, some leeway; some room to manoeuvre. We all need time and space to grow as individuals, albeit in a considerate and co-operative mode. We all need to find some way to begin to initiate and establish a covenant of equitable concord with each other in regard to religion. This concord needs to be one that has space for diversified expression and mutual understanding. It needs time for consultation and reciprocal appreciation. It needs to be based on a rational and ethical commitment to each other, as well as humane, sensitive and reasonable considerations. It needs to be one that eschews egocentric self-promotion and domineering, or a dictatorial manner. It needs to be one that avoids insensitivity and unreasonableness. It can work at overcoming both coldness and naivety. This is an idealistic yet arduous goal. It is a difficult undertaking which needs, not stubbornness, but great resilience, patience, tolerance, objectivity, fairness, honesty, sincerity, truthfulness, and trustworthiness. "The whole point of this life is the healing of the heart's eye through which God is seen"³⁹. It begins with us making a commitment to the religious claim that the Eternal God is the Supreme Source of justice, peace, joy, and love; that He supports and sustains the universe, and as a consequence, us in it. This is understood to happen on wiser, deeper, more imponderable levels than we can imagine, express or fathom. Religion, as we know it, is the claim that we trust God to do the right thing beyond our limited hopes and fears, and in more

³⁸ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 15.4

³⁹ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 226.5

essential and quintessential ways than we can grasp. Thus, together, we can look ahead freely, clearly, intelligently, benevolently, and decisively, knowing that in the final analysis: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deuteronomy 33.27).

Trusting in God, Bahá'ís and Christians have the capacity to take small, gradual steps in the direction of unity. This is not necessarily an organisational unity, but rather an organic federation of concerns based on mutual friendship, understanding and appreciation. To do this, we both need a revival in our hearts of the things that are more fundamental than intellectual propositions, more evangelical than proselytising for larger numbers of enrolments, or more charismatic than noisy enthusiastic assertions. We need to touch the heart of the human condition. A life of goodness, wisdom and righteousness considers the spiritual potential and sublime worth of each and every human being. We need to be more convincing than what contrariness or variance provides,

"He (God) has endowed man with ears that he may hear the message of reality, and conferred upon him the gift of reason by which he may discover things for himself. This is his endowment and equipment for the investigation of reality. Man is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another's ears, nor comprehend with another's brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God"⁴⁰. It is through this method that we find fulfilment, in ourselves, each other, reality and religion. Whatever our differences, "all men are the leaves and fruits of one same tree, they are all branches of the tree of Adam, they all have the same origin...the only differences that exist and that keep them apart are these: there are the children who need guidance, the ignorant to be instructed, the sick to be tended and healed; thus I say that the whole of humanity is enveloped by the mercy and grace of God. As the holy writings tell us: all men are equal before God. He is no respecter of persons"⁴¹. The creator does not subvert the human need to discover and know truth and reality through human effort. God does not subvert the free will placed in man. However, neither is the human need to be educated and loved, and the ability to sacrifice and share dismissed or degraded as a consequence of our individual autonomy. These enrich and extend our capacity when freely done. Self-centredness is only

⁴⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 293

⁴¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 129-130

overcome willingly. Love is only nurtured willingly. Any religion worthy of the title is a candlestick on which burns the light of guidance, education, comfort, healing, encouragement, progress and redemption – necessarily spiritual, inescapably honest, expressively realistic and freely chosen.

3. Reciprocal Fulfilment

3.1 Through our common encounters

Understanding something or someone is satisfying when it meets human needs for succour and illumination. Often it takes time to become sensitive to what these are, especially in others. If we imagine that we have no more need of nourishment or insight ourselves, such conceit is unworthy of us. Or confidence is misplaced and unfounded if we believe that we have arrived at perfection. There is a certain timeliness in breakthroughs of insight and appreciation. When people of two different Faiths meet, it is all too easy to lose sight of the “forest because of the trees”. Our own enthusiastic conviction tempts us to “push our luck” with each other - but hearts are not always won in this way. We are capable, when necessary, of being more contained, more content with steady, modest gains, of focusing on small cumulative accomplishments. A required amount of turn-taking needs to occur. It needs patient faith to go one step at a time in order to allow a Christian or Ba.á.í the space needed to examine and demonstrate the validity and relevance of his/her Faith. We can nurture our ability to flow in an exchange, not like a torrent or a flood, but as an interdependent, co-operative fluid participant. We can pass the cup of fellowship, containing the outlooks, perceptions, insights, and feelings which each individual treasures, to and fro with graciousness and ease. We need to have our hearts sprinkled with a sense of the conditions and needs of each other. Contentiousness is exhausting. It exhausts any sense of relatedness that we may have.

We are so afraid of missing out, that we can become careless in our remarks and heedless in our concerns. We are swept along by the enthusiasm of an opportunity to proclaim the good news, as we see it, to share our beliefs, that we dampen other people's interest. We earn the attention, respect and co-operation of each other by speaking appropriately to the immediate situation and not spinning off into some abstract world. Modesty and relevance,

uninhibited and unforced, have their long-term rewards and subtle impact. Petty ideas or contentious notions tend to cloud immediate issues. For Bahá'ís and Christians to plunge into controversial theologies, without first establishing trust and friendship is unproductive. Religious exchange takes place within the social dynamics of a relationship and real-life situation. It needs to be functional and situational to be fulfilling to both parties. People need to be convinced and comfortable that there are spiritual and circumstantial qualifications, pure motives and clear purposes in a religious exchange. This is in order to prevent the dangers that have historically shamed religion and brought many people to their present state of mistrust and cynicism. Each layer and dimension of belief, faith and trust, needs to be certain of its support experientially, intuitively, intellectually and emotionally. Trust is ever evolving. Truth as man experiences it is ever emerging. Understanding is ever expanding. Honesty is ever challenging.

We each see only gleams of light; some may be seen more clearly or fully than others. Which are brighter is for God to see. As it is, none of us could cope with the full glare. Yet, we are each right and wise to follow what light we ourselves are capable of experiencing. We cannot safely assume to be certain of who is wise among us, and who is not, lest the splinter we see in another's eye turn out to be the shadow of the plank in our own. We can handle all ideas with greater love, greater care, greater ease, greater discernment. "Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace." (James 3.13-18)

Our attitudes and actions do not need rash demands or reckless, impatient ideals. Our faith in the potential in each other has effects beyond our expectations and produces a greater sense of wholeness. Outer conditions and inner drives must be balanced with insight. Competing emotions need to be brought into harmony. This state of mind must underlie every discourse. One cannot assume dominance without there being an overt or covert backlash on

the part of the other participants. In terms of priority, spirituality supports, pervades, and sustains intellect, emotions and physical sensibility, yet without tyranny. Modesty, diplomacy, discretion, and concern for others have primacy over conceit, tactlessness, and self-centredness. They are virtues because they are more efficient, effective and durable. Godliness is the image of God at work within us. As the Sikh Writings indicate: "God is in thy heart, yet thou searchest for Him in the wilderness"⁴².

We must be careful that we do not willingly or heedlessly sow thorns of doubt, thistles of malice, and seeds of dissension in the fertile soil of each other's hearts. We can through our insight, outlook, genuineness, compassion, and faith-filled radiance, awaken in each other the kernel of reciprocity and mutuality on subtle, profound, central, spiritual, godly, and authentic levels. We must allow patience, good-will, and insight to shower their refreshment and resilience on our ideals and ambitions. We can surrender to the conviction that God's love is never lost even though the forms and channels it uses may vary or change. If this is so, then we can readily afford to release all contrariness, volatility, and capriciousness. We can easily afford to see with more loving eyes. What is the point of assisting others out of their difficulties into our own? It is ridiculous to expect others to use their own judgement and then do as we say. Self-enlightened people are sometimes quite ponderous, artless, inelegant, and boring in their efforts to prove how enlightened they are, boring to others who are not so informed and to others who are. Sometimes the best way to be useful is to stop blocking other people's way. The only thing worse than the difficulties of having to grow up spiritually are the difficulties of being grown up. We have no need to become "holy terrors". Authoritarianism has plagued the growth of religion and consolidation of its institutions. We have no need to usurp authority from secular concerns which have been won by mankind at great cost. The cause of Christ and Bahá'ullah has never been served, nor can ever be served, by the betrayal of our humanity. The non-religious populace has judged, and will continue to judge us this regard. Ethical people courageously champion justice, fairness and reasonableness. They value equity for every human being, even if it brings discomfort or personal sacrifice.

We need to avoid evasiveness or dishonesty, in favour of a prudent considerate

⁴² quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 202.1

sounding out of each other's assumptions, concerns and motives. We need to state frankly what we believe without the irritation or restlessness that fuels arguments or suspicion. Sometimes long-winded elaborations are untimely or unrequested. When relationships hang in the balance, we can be courageous enough to take the risk of openness. When doubt is present it is treated to our detriment by subterfuge, cleverness, evasiveness or dismissiveness. We need to be prepared to take a simple, easy non-defensive stand when required, but this depends on the occasion. The fact is that some of us will test everyone and everything new, and we do it in overt and covert ways depending on our personalities. What we are really doing is looking for and sounding out the trustworthiness in the ideals, moods and purposes that are being conveyed and embodied by the conveyor. In such situations quality is more to be desired, of more benefit and value, than quantity. Words and actions given and received with good-will, empathy, sincerity, sensitivity, common-sense and reasonableness are ultimately more productive, more inspiring than those done for show. Nothing enduring and genuine can ever be attributed to force or intrigue. Words need to come, not from outward display, but from within, from the heart, which needs to be kept in a tender state lest it lose the fragrance of God's Breath. Our words have the power to elevate or crush the well-being of others. Our words may teach others to love or loath themselves and those around them. They have the power to affirm or shatter. They encourage trust or doubt.

3.2 Through our unfolding inspiration

Frankness offered in sympathy and consideration gives even our smallest comments and gestures a more genuine weight in the long-term scheme of things. Our concern with persuasiveness need not rely on past successes or present enthusiasms. To glory in the past, rest on our laurels, be somersaulted by our one-eyed view or fantastic expectations of things can interfere with the flow of interactive communication. It is the present that counts as we move out of the past into the future, although it gains its momentum from both. Immediacy and impact gain their value from a more generous, nobler, less egocentric perspective. Thus, in this way, we keep moving ahead to higher vantage points. An adaptable clarity answers the need for both dignity, relevance and growth in religious exchange. That we can give ourselves and each other room to fulfil ourselves is suggested in I Timothy 6:4-7 where the

writer exhorts us to a "doctrine which is according to godliness" and warns us against snobbery or begrudging attitudes, against being "proud, knowing nothing but doting about questions and strifes of words whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness". He asserts that "godliness with contentment is great gain". He goes on to say that fulfilment is when we do good, "rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate." and this, we discover, requires the space others need to express themselves.

These qualities are indicative of the "good foundation against the time to come." (v.19) Our mutual fulfilment, through understanding reality and ourselves, and each other as participants in its passing parade and spectacle, is ongoing, cumulative and measured in an increase in faith and virtue - individually and mutually. In terms of our spiritual orientation, we can soon discover that 'saint' and 'prophet' are terms used to describe those who most fully respond to God through love and insight. The false prophet (is easily recognised for he) speaks out of the self-centred conditioning of the world in 'which he lives'⁴³. Our purpose is not to delude ourselves or others, but to embody and exemplify deep, realistic, subtle, advantageous significances. We need to allow the heaven of our theologies to be cleft asunder, as it were, in order to let the Sun of Truth, the radiance of authenticity and honesty, shine through. We need to find a way whereby we can inhale the subtle fragrances of the Grace of God that underlie our nominal distinctions and abstract generalisations. We cannot do this without a lot of soul-searching, emotional discomfort, intellectual effort, prayer, contemplation, and readings from holy writings. We cannot, as spiritually impelled beings, wriggle out of our responsibility to the Creator and Source of Revelation, and the inescapable essence of our faith. Faith is the channel of grace, and it must be regularly cleansed and refined. It is only in this way that we are justified in our approach to God. All our attitudes and efforts are based on this. We can make a commitment to decency by not displaying prejudice or bigotry.

The curse of religious competitiveness and authoritarianism defames God's Name and enfeebles our testimony to His graciousness and justice. The curse of religious totalitarianism slanders and makes suspect our claims to divine

⁴³ Gilbert Shaw, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 835.8

inspiration. Antagonistic divisiveness and snobbish dissension are immoral. The sinful attitudes and mentalities that arise as duplicity towards ourselves, and our fellow men, lead to and perpetuate bitter splits. We need to listen to the deep cry in our own hearts beyond all our stubbornness and indifference, beyond any self-righteousness and spiritual numbness. We need to listen to the collective cry of history and mankind beyond our personal obsessions or dictatorial ideologies. We need to turn away from contrived, limited and superficial remedies. We need something that begins in, flows from, and returns to the heart. Any cogency, coherence and cohesiveness within and between people is supported by communication. Discourse and dialogue, no matter how small and troublesome are worth the effort. We are capable of taking pains to obtain a more fruitful, objective perspective on the issues that confront us as spiritual beings and religious people. We also need to remember that we are creatures, derived, vulnerable, limited, and interdependent. We have the developmental capacity of steadily gaining the advantage of a more existential, personal, and interactive involvement in faith, as it is revealed through and beyond our own personal beliefs. Whenever resentful misunderstanding occurs the mark has been missed somewhere, and we must uncover it without excessive self-blame and criticism of others. It is part of an evolving process, where ultimately, our bonds, as prophesised in all our scriptures, are to become like family ties.

Any reconciliation on spiritual levels whether acknowledged or not, springs from one's own connection and relationship with Divinity. This connection is one that has thrown us back upon the ineffability, providence, fairness, and mercy of God, as it is operating in our lives. We need to trust that God is the All-sufficing above all things. In doing so, we align ourselves with the spiritually developmental processes at work in us, and around us. Nevertheless, we had better be prepared, as a result, to undergo the disruptive dramatic changes that usually accompany growth. We had better be prepared for changes to our conditioned, imitative ways of perceiving reality. What Providence sends our way is often educational. It challenges us to deeper resourcefulness, autonomy, and interactive understanding. It will claim precedence over any warm feelings of cosiness, or ruts we are stuck in. If we are not willing to make such a conditional commitment in advance, to allow our preferences and priorities to be rearranged, to have the basics of our stewardship put to the test and refined, to undergo a regular spiritual revolution and renewal, recentering, regrounding, re-evaluation, and revival,

so as to be lifted to the next stage of our spiritual perfecting and maturation, then we had better give up the notion of growing up religiously at all.

We can always remember that, in terms of feeling fulfilled in our understanding of our human responses to reality, and our being affected by it, and in our relationships, each ending is a new beginning. The journey ever continues, and at every stage we are confronted by a new paradox and new challenge. This helps us avoid self-satisfied complacency or dogmatism in our understanding of existence as a spiritual vehicle, ourselves as unfolding spiritual beings, of religion as a diversified spiritual expression, or holy scriptures as oceans with allusions and depths yet unplumbed. What a high objective and measure is enjoined on all Christians and Bahá'ís. "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ!" (Ephesians 4.13) And as is expressed in the Bahá'í Writings, "is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent"⁴⁴. Spirituality is not a static, stagnant state. It is the devotional, mystical, motivation, rational, and moral procedure leading towards a greater uncovering of one's capacity to reflect divinity. It is the unfolding of one's ability to become more godly, more Christ-like.

3.3 Through our inescapable devotion

We may have small confidence of reaching the reflected likeness of either Christ or Bahá'u'lláh in this lifetime but such an ideal is our pole star, as it were. Is it not a glimpse of the Blessed Beauty that inspires us to become more beautiful? We follow in Their footsteps, follow Their example and Their purposes in this lifetime. The "Word was made flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth." (John 1:14); that is, the Universal, Creative Declaration of God took on a concrete reality, a concrete personal life, and revealed the divine ground of being in the noble form of the human temple. The fundamental, essentially universal truth for humanity appeared as a

⁴⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Iqan*. The Book of Certitude, p 124

realistic phenomenon for us to reflect in our lives where possible, according to our capacity as enhanced by the grace of God. The Life and Light, exuded as a beam proceeds from the sun, as a result of the Divine Activity, has a transforming, educational effect on man, especially those who are open to Its warmth. The Radiance of God took on human form and exemplified and revealed for us the power of being and knowledge. While it is true that Bahá'ís and Christians have different perspectives on this, the underlying initiative is the same. With respect to the authority of Christ to awaken us and regenerate us wholeheartedly, it can be discovered that this is not subverted in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, but is crystalized and reanimated, albeit in a renewed and refreshing manner. Example and Inspiration move the soul, and the world, much more potently than philosophy, theology, or legality. "The glory of God is man fully alive"⁴⁵.

In religion, the emphasis on personality and history derive from a specific Revelation. This leads to prescriptive approach where laws, ordinances, institutions, and formulae, are given explicitly. Semantic distinctions are maintained through legalistic or literal interpretations. The nominalised, quantitative features of the Revelation are often emphasised. Whereas the emphasis on essence and development gives rise to focus on the qualitative, processive nature of Revelation which leads to a descriptive approach. Principles, significances, metaphors, dynamics, and similarities gain an energetic impulse through a versatile or symbolic application. Both exist side by side in all religious Faiths. They are complementary, and both are necessary at any given time. Yet there is varying emphasis from period to period, culture to culture, and group to group. Different traditions and movements have arisen from their concerns. So, if we, individually or collectively, in explanation or commitment, seem different to each other in our religious understanding and application, it could be due to aforementioned duality at work in religion. What is more important, though, is that we consult and co-ordinate our spiritual urges and religious initiatives in complementary, high-minded, practical, fruitful and relevant ways. The book of Hebrews addresses this issue for the Christian Dispensation. It can show us that the grace of God, and our response to it, is not necessarily a way out so much as a way through, and into deeper significances, more sublime inclusion, and a more transcendent perspective. It teaches us to release that which we no longer

⁴⁵ St Irenaeus, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 206.2

need and allow our concepts to be fresh, new, vital and relevant. We can look beyond ourselves to acknowledge the Spirit greater than ourselves.

We need to be wary of the extremes of being either too literal or too metaphorical. Excessive emphasis on rules, regulations, doctrines, and procedures lead to prudish attitudes, over-specification and authoritarianism. This was the problem Jesus had with the Pharisees. Excessive esoteric abstractions can result in over-generalisation, grandiose claims, undirected or unfocused hopes, which often leads to complacency. In the former, divine teachings are often added to or made a burden. In the latter, they are explained away or made impotent. Both extremes of focus are forms of stagnation. Fanaticism, superstition, anarchy or materialism are inevitable consequences. They seek to compensate hungrily and hopefully, yet ineffectually, for the neglected dynamic of a unifying covenantal ethic containing diversified expression and a consultative mode. Without this dynamic, diversity may be persecuted, freedom and privacy devalued, or co-operation eschewed and responsibility degraded. An understanding sympathy for the limitations of the human condition and an appreciative accord with ennobling human potential is needed. We need these to operate and unfold in a balanced way within religion. We can stand in truthfulness, and move forward with joy as we all have our aspects of spiritual understanding, whether latent or active. We can move into greater goodness with faith, confidence, and mutual respect. We are promised that, "an humble man without learning, but filled with the Holy Spirit, is more powerful than the most nobly-born profound scholar without that inspiration"⁴⁶.

In any religious expression, smug hypocrisy, pedantic self-righteousness, naive gullibility, dogmatic superficiality, and retrograde domineering, can bespeak an imbalance, a certain degree of spiritual immaturity or numbness. To be unreasonable, insensitive, hard-hearted, "a know-it-all", condescending, patronising, even obsequious, conniving, under-handed, pretentious, and "nit-picking", suggests, from a realistically spiritual, and truly religious perspective, a level of inappropriateness. It suggests thoughtlessness and ineptness. All these negative factors simply point to our need to rebalance and mature. They simply reveal to us the limitations, contingency, vulnerability, and imperfection of every human being. They open up for us our need to be

⁴⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 165

more heedful, realistic, patient and grateful to God for our growth and development, our ability to mature in balanced ways, and our progressive impulses. This can be awakened through the refining nature of spiritual endeavour. This can be stimulated by a purposeful fulfilling quest for an even greater religious understanding. Life is about living and learning, and steadily coming to terms with situations and people. It is about coming to terms with reality on all its apparent and subtle levels. Negative responses come up to let us know that we are still holding on to and relying on faulty assumptions. They let us know that it is time to work on our attitudes and reactions in a more sublime, refined spiritually-sophisticated manner, even if just a little at a time. "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." (Proverbs 4.18). We still have much to learn so we need to remain always open to growth and educational surprises. The paradox is that all our efforts at progress need to bring forth a profound ease emerging from a deep faith. "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You"⁴⁷.

It is only through a restful trust in God, and a confidence in His benign justice that we can gently move forward and softly accomplish things worthwhile.

4. Genuine Empathy

4.1 In our common spiritual commitment

What is to be encountered in this quest for a greater, yet easier harmony with our common humanity and innate ideals is not really that new or original, but it needs to ever be genuine and heartfelt. These qualities are for us, in some respect, the primary measures of any idea's worth. It is to ourselves that our thoughts are firstly addressed, as a way of clarifying our intuitions and motivations, and providing a fertile ground and productive atmosphere within which we can view the relationship that exists in us between a Christian experience and Bahá'í experience. There is basically no essential contradiction or break, but this may not be accepted or appreciated by everyone. It involves the modest realistic stance that there are honest, idealistic impulses that both

⁴⁷ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 227-7

Bahá'ís and Christians share at very deep, profound and subtle religious levels, as is expressed in Phillipians 3:8-16: "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord... that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death... Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus...". For "Religion in its humility restores man to his only dignity, the courage to live by grace"⁴⁸. Further, "He that loves God seeks neither gain nor reward but only to lose all, even himself"⁴⁹ (St John of the Cross: MD.396.7). We can have faith that the supernatural awaits and sustains the growth and progress of our spiritual nature, but it must not be forgotten that it purifies. We become poor in our own conceits and rich in the things of God's glory. We become nothing compared to His designs yet ennobled by the invisible presence and sparkling beauty of the Loved One, whereby we live for God, with God, from God, and in God.

Bahá'u'lláh states: "O Son of Justice! whither can a lover go but to the land of his beloved? And what seeker findeth rest away from his heart's desire? To the true lover reunion is life, and separation is death. His breast is void of patience and his heart hath no peace. A myriad lives he would forsake to hasten to the abode of his beloved"⁵⁰, or in other words "Only love enables humanity to grow, because love engenders life and it is the only form of energy that lasts forever"⁵¹.

Motivated by our love for God, and from God, we must make sure that the quest for refinement, maturity, sincere intent and pure motive is not confused at this stage with sterility, blandness or pretentiousness. This barrenness

⁴⁸ George Santayana, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 244.5

⁴⁹ St John of the Cross, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 396.7

⁵⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words in Persian*, no. 4

⁵¹ Michael Quoist, quoted, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 278.4

comes from a denial of, or indifference to, our common humanity. To be sure, we are often overcome by a sense of failure, immaturity and inadequacy, and we sometimes feel discouraged, disheartened and disappointed. Even if there is a discord between our hopes and our circumstances, it is not an excuse for us to wallow in self-pity, blame or be constantly judgmental of ourselves, or each other. Such arrogance and lack of objectivity is not fruitful. Having a teachable spirit is an impetus to move forward, onward, and upward. It is an impetus to take the next step no matter how small. We can always remember that the opportunity for great deeds may never come, but the opportunity for good deeds is renewed day by day. The thing to long for is the goodness, not the worldly glory. We seem to be often trying to accomplish something big, not realising that life is made up of little things. One of those little things is to seek contact with God's activity in the simple goodness and splendour of every trial and circumstance. The ordinary ways, customs, and habits, which we all engage in are not a matter of conflict with Providence but rather necessary bulwarks of reality and spirituality. We can see the goodness of God reflected in the simple goodness within others.

How can we see God's countenance reflected and mirrored in ordinary, everyday people and situations? Obviously "No man hath seen God at any time...(but)... if we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us." (1 John 4.12). Jesus declared God (John 1.18) by living in a simple way and mixing with all sorts of people, even outcasts. He experienced the most common of emotions and events with sincerity and insight. He appreciated the simple and plain things, people and situations because He knew that His Father was always at work, and therefore, so was He (John 5.17). All of His life was change, but His response was ever refreshing and renewing. He was courageous and independent in His forgiveness, sacrifice, fairness, peace, love, and unshakeable trust in God. We too can listen to God by hearing the joys and potential of life, of people. Nevertheless, we are directed to: "Love the creatures for the sake of God... You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being, and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy. Therefore do not look at the

shortcomings of anybody, see with the eye of forgiveness"⁵².

We need to see beyond dogmas, structures and organisation to people themselves, although the former have a necessary and inescapable function; and then beyond people to God's mercy and grace. We can look into each other's hearts with their hopes and dreams, disappointments and sacrifices, -at times in conflict, at times in harmony. Regardless of the sublimity of the ordained and organisational potential of a religion, it is still upheld and nourished by the spirit of God working freely through people - finite people clinging to infinite values. It is our duty to co-ordinate our tensions and values within our own Faiths, and then between our Faiths, through our faith. Peace comes when we can accept the shortcomings of ourselves and others. It comes when we let go of hurts and affronts and move on. It comes from within each and every human being, spreads outwards to others, and so ripples to every corner of the earth, one heart and deed at a time.

Both Bahá'ís and Christians have hopes for a better world touched by the creative, available power of God's Spirit, as found in the nobler aspects of creation, and built on and developed by the enduring principles available to us through our respective Revelations. The way ahead is, in its means and outcomes, none other than genuine respect, voluntary co-operation, uplifting appreciation, and tactful fellowship without demanded reorganisation, disadvantageous fear, reprobate antagonism, or a perverse betrayal of our respective commitments to the teachings of our Founders. History pictures the tragic alternative to these factors. To separate ourselves from unbelief and mistrust begins within. It does not necessarily imply rejecting others because their interpretation and understanding of scripture are different, unless they are being used for self-centred, divisive aims. To separate ourselves from other Faiths suggests that unbelief has not been righteously dealt with in one's own soul. It infers a belief that reasonableness is not wise, that sincerity is not virtuous, that love is not love wherever it occurs. It infers a lack of belief that "God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him." (Acts 10.34-35). It implies a subtle duplicity, in that we expect others to delve beneath the surface references to unearth durable principles and significances, while we remain unwilling to do the same. It suggests that our obsession with "One Way" has

⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 93

forgotten that its narrowness is a reference to its focus, that its straightness is its direction. Its oneness is sharp enough to release us from the traps of superficial labels and expectations and open a way through and past personal inclinations, and liberate us into sharper, clearer, more focused character of the all-embracing, pervasive, more profound and demanding nature of God's Active Providence through His Spirit. Christ embodied and sacrificed His life for this kind of spiritual cohesion.

God has not called people to a ministry of bigotry and condemnation, but of transformative spirituality, discernment, infectious compassion, and developing skilfulness. Yet, we need to establish ourselves, to put down roots into God's eternal covenant with man. Divine Truth seeks to express itself in time and space. Our culture, the needs of the time, our own conscience, and our idiosyncracies are all factors in a personal relationship between man and God. They are acceptable to the Creator and are useful instruments in His Hands. We all have specific temperaments and gifts, and it behoves us to find a religious arena for their development, refinement, and increasing usefulness. We have no need at all to consider ourselves superior to those believers in God's grace who do not find their immediate fulfilment in the group that we find satisfaction. What is placed on us, regardless of what identity we assume, is a responsibility to carry out our spiritual responsibilities, and uncover spiritual bounty, as to provide the blessings we ought to provide. Our religion, whatever its name, needs to be beneficial and productive, not a mere code of beliefs or laws, but the "unsealed choice wine" of spiritual power, genuineness, fairness, and love. If what is said here is obvious, - then we can be content that it strikes a chord in our awareness.

4.2 In our unfolding spiritual growth

The claims that there is a fundamental obligation that links Bahá'ís and Christians alike, must not appear too grandiose. We need to be simple and straightforward. If, we are mentally stimulated into further self-satisfaction and self-congratulation, we have failed. Somehow, somehow, the influence of religious revelation, on which we ponder and comment, must leave us more creative, more durable, more nurturing and nourishing. It must leave us more tender and steady, clearer, warmer, more courageous and adaptable, more sharing and happier, more stable and down-to-earth. It is steadily possible to

become more sensitive and sensible towards each other. We are able to progressively detach ourselves from the extremes of grandiose claims and petty fixations. We have the ability to gradually learn to detach ourselves from indifference, cynicism, conceit and supercilious attitudes. We can learn from each other. We actually need each other. We each have an insight that the other does not have. Let no one imagine that he has no influence. God brings us together for mutually educational purposes. As Confucius said: "Without feelings of respect, what is there to distinguish men from beasts?"⁵³. If we offer a place in our lives to others, we must also make the space and time for them to find it. If we are so understanding about ourselves when we do something wrong, then we can readily grant that same forgiveness and tolerance to others.

Who among us has no defects? "The world of existence is progressive (and) is dependent for its progress on reformation, a reformation that is an educational process: the world of nature is incomplete and imperfect until awakened and illumined by the light and stimulus of education"⁵⁴. The spiritual education of oneself is a prime responsibility. In the Bible we are warned against the folly of intellectual pride. "If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of Him" (Corinthians 8.2-3) and "By love alone is God enjoyed, by love alone delighted in, by love alone approached and admired. His nature requires love. The law of nature commands thee to love Him: the law of His nature and the law of thine"⁵⁵. Spirituality, of which love is the core, is like a mountain, the further you climb, the higher it is. It is like the earth, the further you go the further it extends. Shallow people use up their strength and give up. Only those who have a real, true, realistic and truthful trust in God can explore its height, depth and breadth. We can be like explorers opening the way for others to follow. This is the concern of deep spiritual love and wisdom. This is the living meaning of religious understanding.

Who among us knows everything? Fulfillment is found through knowledge, understanding and insight when our hearts are "comforted, being knit together

⁵³ quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 355.10

⁵⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted by Julio Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, p 50

⁵⁵ Thomas Traherne, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 279.5

in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words." (Colossians 2 : 2-4) It is not clever words that fulfil our need to understand God or each other. It is fellowship, and learning to be Christ-like. A simple saint has more practical wisdom than the greatest academic if that academic uses his knowledge as a springboard for the ego. Fulfilment is not found in how much we know as much as how that realisation links us to God through faith-filled love and to each other through faithful appreciation and empathy. All our understanding is aimed at these principles. It grows through them and is matured by them. The thing to always remember, when we as individuals or groups encounter each other, is that we are all seeking fulfilment. It is the field in which we seek fulfilment that may vary.

We can avoid turning truths into dogmas through bickering, one-upmanship, or dispute. War begins as contentiousness in the heart, and must be dealt with there first. When it erupts between us in seed form as antagonism, it must be dealt with immediately. As the Zoroastrian Writings say: "War is the greatest crime man perpetrates against man"⁵⁶. The Tao Te Ching admonishes us: "Weapons of war are tools of evil; those who truly admire them are murderers at heart"⁵⁷. Arrogance, resentment, fear, deceit, envy, and greed are all the seeds and tools of war within us and between us. They are ugly, divisive, debilitating, inappropriate, dishonourable and ignoble. Why are we so addicted to them? It is time for Bahá'ís and Christians to go 'cold-turkey', as it were, despite the discomfort and withdrawal symptoms. It is the faith, peace and empathy that we find and nurture within the deepest, richest, noblest places of our beings that brings harmony to our attitudes, relationships and the world. When we activate, practice, and nourish these energies through responsive and responsible deeds we are serving the God of Righteousness and giving form to redemptive grace. We need a spiritual inspiration in order to generate the patience, adaptability, and will-power essential for putting arduous new ideals into practice, without destroying the integrity of ourselves and others. We are reminded: "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works, can faith save him?... if it hath not

⁵⁶ Quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 445.1

⁵⁷ Quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 444.8

works (it) is dead, being alone... for as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2: 14,17,26).

When a person achieves an understanding of the spiritual aspects of human life, he begins to act more and more in a manner that encourages and supports a similar development in others. It is necessary to have the goal to depart from this life having removed from one's heart and the world, some of the need for weapons, strife and provocation. We should have done something, in some small way, to alleviate unhappiness and misery in human hearts. We should have done something, in some small way to strengthen the bonds of human fellowship, and help cure man's inhumanity to man. We should have made an attempt to reconcile the difference between responsible freedom and freely-chosen responsibility. It begins in our own lives first. This may sound very idealistic, yet if we do not nurture such a goal, a state of peace and harmony will never reign in human hearts, or on earth, in any form. We must first take the log out of our own eye before criticising another for the speck in his.

Since the length of an individual lifetime in this world is brief, it is wise to dedicate ourselves to the most sublime of goals. "These days are swiftly passing and this mortal life will remain fruitless and without result. Therefore, while there is yet time and the arrow is in the bow, enter ye the chase and strike ye the game. This game is the good-pleasure of God, and this chase is the merciful Providence, that is, living in accord with the divine instructions"⁵⁸. As we need to try to nourish and strengthen ourselves, so we should do the same for others. If someone disparages another, it means that he perceives that person as something separate from and foreign to himself. We must ever remember that the feelings and hopes of others are, in many ways, the same as ours. Any religion, worth its salt, conveys high thoughts and aspirations, and views all the people in the world as members of one great family. As the Bible says: "God that made the world and all things therein... hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth... that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from everyone of us: for in Him we live, and more, and have our being... for we are also His offspring..." (Acts 17.24, 26-29).

⁵⁸ *Nearness to God; Readings for Morn and Eve, reading for May 14th*

We will undoubtedly err at some point as we work through the lessons we must learn. Forgiveness is as necessary to life as the air we breathe. We become frustrated when obstacles arise, but anger shows that a person feels he or she alone, or some other person - not God - is responsible for our tests and the strength we need. Only by admitting our own faults and human limitations can we learn to depend on God more, and become more tolerant and loving towards our fellowman and to his shortcomings. Religion is that which allows our finite, individual consciousness to relate to the Universal Spirit of God. It allows this connection to be brought into our immediate awareness, and to be used practically in our day to day lives.

4.3 In our inescapable religious expressiveness

What gives religious teachings their attractiveness, cohesiveness, power, relevance, and honour? What rains sanctity on the dry and commonplace from the clouds of spiritual bounty? What dissolves our disappointments and causes our disillusionments to evaporate? "He that loveth another has fulfilled the law... (for)... love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13.8, 10); or as 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "By the absence of love, enmity increases. By the exercise of love, love strengthens and enmities dwindle away"⁵⁹; "Jesus Christ sought to create this love in the hearts. He suffered all difficulties and ordeals that perchance the human heart might become the fountain source of love. Therefore, we must strive with all our heart and soul that this love may take possession of us so that all humanity... may be connected through the bond of this divine affection: for we are all the waves of one sea; we have come into being through the same bestowal and are recipients from the same centre... the centre of effulgence is the sun, and we must direct our gaze to the sun. God is the Supreme Centre. The more we turn toward this Centre of Light, the greater will be our capacity"⁶⁰. Hence "There is a net of love by which you can catch souls"⁶¹.

Love releases and relaxes. It is free, therefore it is attractive. If we see an opportunity for some practice of warm consideration in every encounter, we

⁵⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 9

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p 15

⁶¹ Mother Teresa, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 279.4

are opening our inner eye to the omnipresent goodness of God, "Love is the cause of the existence of all phenomena and the absence of love is the cause of disintegration... Love is the conscious bestowal of God, the bond of affiliation in all phenomena"⁶²; "If Jesus Christ had not possessed love for the world of humanity, surely He would not have welcomed the cross. He was crucified for the love of mankind. Consider the infinite degree of that love. It has been likewise with all the Prophets and Holy souls. If the Bab had not manifested love for mankind, surely He would not have offered His breast for a thousand bullets. If Bahá'u'lláh had not been aflame with love for humanity, He would not have willingly accepted forty years' imprisonment"⁶³.

To love as Holy Souls do is not only a precept, it is our vocation, our destiny and our fulfilment. It is our only central resource, our only axis, our only enduring meaning, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love..." (1 John 4.7-8). More binding than all our labels is the directive to love, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22.37-40).

Consequently, it must be remembered that for empathy with others to be genuine, it must spring from our love for God, for "resuscitation is impossible except through a heavenly potency, a supernatural power, the divine power of the Holy Spirit"⁶⁴. We must become attracted to God. The breaths of the Holy Spirit must take effect. Unless this is so, it is impossible for the teachings of God to accomplish in us"⁶⁵. As Jesus said, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3.3, 6) "The divine aspect, or spiritual nature consists of the breaths of the Holy Spirit. The second birth of which Jesus has spoken refers to the appearance of this heavenly nature in

⁶² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 255

⁶³ *ibid.*, p257

⁶⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 277

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p 250

man. It is expressed in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and he who is baptized by the Holy Spirit is a veritable manifestation of divine mercy to mankind. Then he becomes just and kind to all humanity; he entertains no prejudice and ill-will toward none; he shuns no nation or people⁶⁶; "Illumine and hallow your hearts; let them not be profaned by the thorns of hate or the thistles of malice. Ye dwell in one world, and have been created through the operation of One Will. Blessed is he who mingleth with all men in a spirit of utmost kindness and love"⁶⁷. We need to be interested in each other and be tolerant of each other's idiosyncracies and imperfections for the sake of God. We must do it for goodness' sake.

If we are Bahá'ís or Christians, just to avoid being wrong, or just to be more right at the expense of others being more wrong, our spirituality is suspect. Our own candle does not shine brighter because we blow someone else's out. The light only increases when all the candles shine. We need righteousness more than rightness. We need truthfulness before we can understand any truth.

We need a corrective faith before we can be concerned with what is correct. Such virtues as righteousness, truthfulness and faith are not ours to claim as self-originated or self-sustained. They are created potential in all people awaiting the stimulation of Divine Grace. When released through participatory faith rather than nominal belief they acquire both a natural and heavenly dimension. Their inherent vitality is unlocked. That is why God is the Primal Creative and Redemptive Force - not us. Our duty and bounty is to care for, and cultivate these virtues interactively, mutually, and reciprocally. This is a duty and a bounty. It is a trusteeship, and a stewardship. It is not a grasping, stingy, self-opinionated, self-congratulatory ownership. All things come from God, and unto Him do they return. Empathy for others springs from an empathy with God's Providence. The universal panorama includes other people. Faithfulness arises from a more benign, genuine and substantial base than the ego. Faithfulness matures our self-consciousness beyond its mean-spirited inefficient boundaries.

"Peace on earth and goodwill towards men" was the angelic promise at Christ's birth. Christ's ministry may begin with the redemption of the individual soul but it does not end there. We are warned in the Bible not to be

⁶⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 41

⁶⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 334

“removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel, which is not another, but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ... do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ... for I received it not of man... but by the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1.6-7, 10, 12). We are instructed to have our, “feet shod with the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6.15). Christ’s gospel was not a gospel of legalistic, credal extremes or obsessions. It was the good news of spiritual reconciliation as manifested in His Purity and Essence, and exhibited and fulfilled through all He was, did, and still is. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts that, “the Spirit of Christ is always pouring upon the contingent world, and is manifest before the insight of the people of assurance”⁶⁸. Spiritual reconciliation must occur not only within us but also between us. It needs to quicken us into a cooperative service to God and mankind.

Will this task of mutual respect and service to mankind be challenging? Yes, it will, but, “To the loyal soul, a test is but God’s grace and favour; for the valiant doth joyously press forward to furious battle on the field of anguish, when the coward, whimpering with fright; will tremble and shake. So too, the proficient student, who with great competence mastered his subjects and committed them to memory, will happily exhibit his skills before his examiners on the day of his tests. So too will solid gold wondrously gleam and shine out in the assayer’s fire. It is clear then, then tests and trials are, for sanctified souls, but God’s bounty and grace, while to the weak, they are calamity, unexpected and sudden”⁶⁹.

Part of the deal of loving God wholeheartedly is to remain inwardly positive, firm and cheerful in our faith, as well as outwardly supple in our faithfulness to the nobility, beauty, and justice of religious co-operation and spiritual connectedness. One of the measures of maturity is having the capacity to continually grow. However, this needs a dynamic foundation, “For every one of you his paramount duty is to choose for himself that on which no other thing may infringe or usurp from him. Such a thing - and to this the Almighty is My witness is the love of God, could ye but perceive it. Build ye for yourselves such houses as the rains and floods can never destroy, which shall protect you from the changes and chances of this life. This is the instruction of

⁶⁸ *Bahá’í References to Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, p 113

⁶⁹ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p 181-2

Him Whom the world hath wronged and forsaken"⁷⁰; "O My Servants! Deprive not yourselves of the unfading and resplendent Light that shineth within the Lamp of Divine Glory. Let the flame of the love of God burn brightly within your radiant hearts. Feed it with the oil of Divine guidance. Guard it within the globe of trust and detachment from all else but God"⁷¹. As the Bible says "... put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge, after the image of Him that created him... Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any; even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness" (Colossians 3.10, 12-14). "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (1 Corinthians 13.13).

What this implies for Bahá'ís and Christians is that before we can even begin sharing our faiths with each other and working together in the service of mankind, we must be sure of our own spiritual life, its growth and vitality. Moreover the possibility of expanding our vision and enlarging our capacity is always ours to strive for, "Virtue is nothing but well-directed love"⁷².

Referring to the other founders of religions, Bahá'ís are warned that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh "does not seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their Cause"⁷³. Similarly, "In this Day, we can neither approve the conduct of the fearful that seeketh to dissemble his faith, nor sanction the behaviour of the believer that clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this cause. Both should observe the dictates of wisdom, and strive diligently to serve the best interests of the faith"⁷⁴; "The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. We cherish the hope that the light of justice may shine upon the world and sanctify it from tyranny."⁷⁵

⁷⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 261

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p325

⁷² St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 439.3

⁷³ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 57-8

⁷⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 343

⁷⁵ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 218

Conclusion

As a consequence of having considered the refining purpose of our spiritual quest, the need for a genuine spiritual and the mutual fulfilment and universal benefit we can uncover in our religious endeavour, what are the prime considerations? They are that "The reason for God's having made Himself manifest, and for this shining forth of infinite lights from the realm of the invisible, is none other than the training of all men's souls and the refining of the characters of all on earth - so that blessed individuals who have freed themselves from the murk of the animal world, shall rise up with those qualities which are the adornings of the reality of man"⁷⁶; "He is a true Bahá'í who strives by day and by night to progress and advance along the path of human endeavour, whose most cherished desire is so to live and act as to enrich and illuminate the world, whose source of inspiration is the essence of Divine virtue, whose aim in life is to conduct himself as to be the cause of infinite progress. Only when he attains unto such perfect gifts can it be said of him that he is a true Bahá'í"⁷⁷; "To be a real Christian is to be a servant in His Cause and Kingdom, to go forth under His banner of peace and love toward all mankind, to be self-sacrificing and obedient, to become quickened by the breaths of the Holy Spirit, to be mirrors reflecting the radiance of the divinity of Christ, to be fruitful trees in the garden of His planting, to refresh the world by the water of life of His teachings - in all things to be like Him and filled with the spirit of His love"⁷⁸. As Jesus said, "Wherefore by their fruits shall ye know them. Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my father which is in heaven" (Matthew 7.20-21), which concurs with Proverbs 11:30, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life".

Could either a Bahá'í or Christian pray with the same depth as this Islamic prayer: "Whatever share of this world Thou doest bestow on me, bestow it on Thine enemies, and whatever share of the next world Thou dost give me, give it to Thy friends. Thou art enough for me"⁷⁹. For as the Bible says: "All things

⁷⁶ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 10

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p 18-9

⁷⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 6

⁷⁹ Rabi'ah of Basra, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 96.a

came from Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee." (1 Chronicles: 29.14) Such sentiments posit a spiritual surrender to God, and a workable sense of loving oneness and friendliness with others. The acknowledgement of this commission, mandate, and delegation, enables us to stay balanced in all life's changes and cycles. It enables us to be appreciative, of life's creative flow and circulation through us, and between us, since its origin and culmination is in the Indescribable, Transcendent yet ever Personal and Immanent Life of life. We can accept life knowing that it exists for our inner perfecting and refinement. It exists for our advance on germinal and pivotal levels. Thus, are we inspired by ideals but not neglectful of reality. We are grounded by reality but not enslaved by it. We can celebrate what accord we already have with each other. We can be glad and grateful to be here and now. We can appreciate the present for the seminal opportunities it contains, and the moderating requirements it challenges us with. These are the gifts of God to us now. The present situation is none other than the receptacle for God's sublime good-pleasure and claim on us. It is the channel for His educational purposes and our cultivation. We can stand centred in regeneration, grounded in faith, established in His love, and balanced in service. We stand centered in all the important little, simple and easy truths. Such as, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14.40), remembering that "the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law... If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the spirit" (Galatians 5.22, 23, 25).

We are thus impelled, and compelled, by the challenging, refining nature of our common religious spirituality, in its endeavour for a more authentic purpose, to patiently investigate our prejudices and presumptions. Bahá'ís and Christians need to uncover a deeper sense of developmental affinity, due to the realization that we are becoming even more inescapably interfaced through historical and global developments, as well as our spiritual impulses. It is incumbent upon us, as a consequence, to cultivate a more resilient objectivity in dealing with the uniqueness of each individual's response, religious needs and spiritual quest, regardless of their religious affiliation. Only through our being fulfilled in reciprocal ways can we nourish a more substantial understanding of ourselves and each other. It is a genuine appreciation and empathy between people that enriches and invigorates religion, and refines faith, in real people, and in more reliable ways than any semantic rigidity, abstract information or esoteric descriptions can ever do.

Religion is not merely something to be known and studied intellectually. It is to be experienced deeply and spiritually, and lived sensibly, reasonably, appropriately, wholeheartedly, clearly and generously. It requires a focus and direction based on faith towards, and springing from, the renewing and regenerating grace of God, and His Revelation and Manifestation to humankind. Wisdom and knowledge are not always the same thing. The intellect can never lead one to a complete religious outlook or spiritual insight. One has to use one's entire being and situation to come into contact with the truth, "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! or Lo there! for, behold the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17.20-21).

Our affirmation needs to be that we all grow in our faith regardless of whether we agree or disagree with each other individually. Faith is much better than belief. Belief is when someone else has done the necessary thinking. Faith is much more, for it dwells in the reasonable heart and not just the reasoning mind; it abides in the sensitive soul and not just the sensational emotions and promotes the growth of spirit. It is like the song of the bird at the dawning of a new day. Our anxieties may be overcome by remembering the following words, "Christ leads me through no darker rooms than He went through before; Those that unto God's kingdom come must enter by this door"⁸⁰. Faith does not necessarily reveal itself in a religious label, or through fixated jargon. It reveals itself in the conviction that the hidden God revealed Himself in His world and in history in a very particular way. This is not imprisoned in a set of propositions, but was incarnated for us. It is reflected by us, through the power of Grace manifested as Love, and all the signs that accompany That Ministry to our hearts and lives. Whatever separate explanations, specific attributes, particular characteristics, distinct individuality, definitely prescribed mission, we assign to our religion are bridges not barriers. Whatever unique names, we as Bahá'ís or Christians joyously and wholeheartedly respond to, are personally attracted and committed to, our motive is the same. We want to respond to the Voice of God as we hear it and drink from the Cup of the love of God that is in our hands. We all have a need to constantly realign ourselves with the inmost essence and supreme singleness of God's love. We all need to attune ourselves to the melody of the Eternal Voice that is available and accessible to our own individuality. We are all drops in that limitless Ocean of

⁸⁰ Richard Baxter, *Pocket Prayers*, p 77

mercy, therefore we must seek out harmony in our souls and relationships.

We may have different perceptions on how this can be fulfilled, yet we can be one with the divine process and one with each other in seeking to respond to its challenge. We can be one in our responsibility to do our part. Therefore, whatever our religious penchant, we are still left with the exhortation: "O ye beloved of the Lord! Strive to become the manifestations of the love of God, the lamps of divine guidance shining amongst the kindreds of the earth with the light of love and concord"⁸¹. This inescapable admonition can be our common purpose. Its realisation can unfold pragmatically through us. Its importance can be our common contemplation. Its significance can be our common prayer.

"Make my heart overflow with love for Thy creatures
and grant that I may become the sign of Thy mercy, the token of Thy grace,
the promoter of concord amongst Thy loved ones,
devoted unto Thee, uttering Thy commemoration and forgetful of self
but ever mindful of what is Thine."

*'Abdu'l-Bahá*⁸²

"Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is discord, unity. Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is error, truth. Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light...
For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

*St. Francis*⁸³

⁸¹ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 28

⁸² *Bahá'í Prayers and Holy Writings, A Selection*, p 74

⁸³ *Pocket Prayers*, pp 14-5

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Medieval Islam

The Influence of Islam on Judaism and Christianity

Anjam Khursheed

Abstract

Islamic civilisation at its cultural height, was not only characterised by a creative harmony between science and religion, but was open to learn from many older traditions, secular and religious. Prior to the European Renaissance, Islam inspired revivals in the religious and cultural traditions of Christianity and Judaism. The aim of this paper is to show how these spiritual reforms indicate a fundamental harmony between Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The paper also seeks to demonstrate that the religious reforms inspired by Islam were a necessary prelude to the European renaissance and the modern scientific revolution.

1. Introduction

There are many references within the Bahá'í writings to modern civilisation being essentially Islamic in origin. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, wrote in his book, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, that, "A careful and thorough investigation of the historical record will establish the fact that the major part of the civilisation of Europe is derived from Islam; for all the writings of Muslim scholars and divines and philosophers were gradually collected in Europe and were with the most painstaking care weighed and debated at academic gatherings and in the centres of learning, after which their valued contents would be put to use"¹. 'Abdu'l-Bahá cited, John

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p 3

William Draper (1811-1882), as one of the few European historians who fully acknowledged the Islamic contribution².

The grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, states that, "The so-called Christian civilization, of which the Renaissance is one of the most striking manifestations, is essentially Muslim in its origins and foundations... It is wholly unfair to attribute the efflorescence of European culture during the Renaissance period to the influence of Christianity. It was mainly the product of the forces released by the Muhammadan Dispensation"³. Earlier in the same letter, Shoghi Effendi suggests that Bahá'ís have the task of dispelling the "misunderstanding about Islam in the West", and show how the Islamic teachings have "guided the course of human development".

Of course, there is now much more well documented evidence published in the West on the subject of Islam being the inspiration to the European Renaissance than in 1875, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote the *Secret of Divine Civilization*⁴. But much misunderstanding about Islam in the West still exists. The historian Norman Daniel, in his book, "Islam and the West", describes how many western prejudices about Islam were formed during the medieval period, and how they have persisted up to the present day⁵.

The Holy Wars between Islam and Christianity from the beginning of the 12th century to the middle of the 13th century mark one of the most infamous episodes of religious fanaticism and hypocrisy in all religious history. For Christians, the religious frenzy of seven crusades, starting from the declaration of the first crusade in 1095 to the recapture of Jerusalem in 1249, involved not only the killing of Muslim infidels in the Holy Land, but spread to large scale massacres of Jews throughout Europe.

² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, pp 92-3

³ Shoghi Effendi, letter to an individual believer dated April 27th, 1936, quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, by H. Hornby, no. 1004, p372

⁴ See for instance the collection of essays in, *The Genius of Arab Civilization, source of the Renaissance*, editor John R. Hayes, or in, *Islamic Science* by S. H. Nasr

⁵ See the chapter X, 'The Survival of Medieval concepts', Norman Daniel in, *Islam and the West, the making of an Image*

For the Papacy, the crusades were only one of a series of wars. Others had already been waged against the Eastern orthodox church and yet others were being fought against the Roman Emperor, and Kings of France and England. The general period for Christianity, is arguably, the lowest point in all its spiritual history.

But the interaction of religions is a complex phenomenon. Through all the killing and destruction, the crusaders were making religious and cultural discoveries, and the beginnings of what became known as a Christian revival was on its way. The very religion which the crusaders set out to defeat, exercised a profound influence on medieval Christendom, both in religious and cultural terms.

Islamic civilisation at its cultural height, was not only characterised by a creative harmony between science and religion, but was open to learn from many older ancient traditions, secular and religious. Prior to bringing about the European Renaissance, Islam inspired revivals in the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity. The aim of this paper is to show that these spiritual reforms were essential prerequisites to the modern scientific revolution and demonstrate how the rise of a new religion can revive the older ones.

2. Islamic Science

The origins of modern science are not only European. There is a standard misconception about the growth of science - a popular myth which has come to dominate the European mind ever since the close of the Middle Ages. According to this myth, science originated in ancient Greece. It was then preserved by the Arabs while Europe was plunged into the "Dark Age". During this time, all scientific progress came to a halt. When science was transmitted back to Europe in the 13th century it began to bear immediate fruit. The revival of Greek learning in Latin Christendom caused an intellectual revolution in Europe, particularly through the works of Plato and Aristotle, and eventually culminated into the European Renaissance out of which modern science grew^{6,7}.

⁶ B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p 420

Such notions of the history of science portray Europeans to be both the originators and developers of science, while designating the role of other cultures either as completely "barbaric" to science, or like the Arabs, to be "preservers" of what is seen to be essentially a European heritage. How this myth came to dominate the Western mind for many centuries is a complex question. No doubt the propaganda associated with the crusades provided much of the initial socio-political impetus to it, but that does not explain its duration up to the present day. One suspects that western technological and industrial supremacy ever since the industrial revolution has not helped to dispel the myth, but rather encourage it. Perhaps the dominant role played by Europe in scientific research and technological development over the last few centuries has blinded many into believing that Europe had always led the world in these areas. But whatever the reasons, the historical records indicate otherwise; modern science is very much a multi-cultural heritage. Not only were major developments to the growth science made from non-European cultures, but they came during the Middle Ages - precisely in the period which is most commonly regarded as a "Dark Age" for cultural and scientific development.

From the very beginning, the popular European myth on the growth of science is at best, oversimplified. The Ionian philosophers speculating on the primary substance of the universe, or the Pythagoreans finding mathematical harmonies in the universe did not arrive at their theories from a cultural vacuum. Living on the Eastern outposts of Greek colonies, they were brought into close contact with other cultures - older civilisations where important scientific developments had already taken place. The ancient Greeks themselves frequently acknowledged their debt to the cultures of Egypt and Babylon. One cannot deny the title of science for instance to pre-ancient Greek cultural achievements such as the invention of multiplication and division in Arithmetic, or to the techniques used to construct a 750 feet Pyramid base structure with only an error of less than 1 inch, or to the measuring of the seasons by using the time lapse between helical risings of the star Sirius as a fundamental unit. Quite simply, the ancient Greeks greatly added to science, but they did not create it. Their contributions in the art of deductive reasoning, in

⁷ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p 90-1

geometrical mathematics were invaluable to the subsequent development of science. Their translation of empirical laws into general mathematical formulae anticipated many developments in later science - centuries later. Yet in the final analysis, ancient Greek science was an important phase in the evolution of science, but not its parent-seed. There were many other contributions to science that were non-European in origin, and were made at other periods in history which proved to be just as influential to the growth of modern science as the ancient Greek contribution. The Middle Ages was such a time.

To designate the period from the collapse of Rome at the end of the 5th century AD to the beginning of the 12th century AD in European history as a "Dark Age", serves as a useful marker for historians and broadly speaking is justified. During this period, most of Europe was overrun by Germanic tribes whose invasions stunted cultural growth, embroiled European people in wars and feuds whose impact lasted well over 700 years. It put an end to the early period of the Byzantine empire which had begun with Emperor Constantine (288-337 AD) and under whose orbit fell several important centres of learning. But to apply the term "Dark Age" to describe the general state of science during the period of the Middle Ages is completely inaccurate. In fact the opposite is true. While most of Europe was undergoing a cultural dark period, science as a whole was undergoing a particularly enlightened one. While England and France were tormented with internal disorders and factional rivalries, and the churches of Europe were racked with controversies over religious doctrines such as the legitimate use of icons, the rulers of the Islamic Empire lived in magnificent luxury in Baghdad, the cultural capital of the world. By the 8th century, as Europe languished in the Dark Ages, the Muslim Empire reached from Spain and southern France to the borders of China and India, a spectacular fusion of diverse cultures and peoples, renowned for its patronage and promotion of learning and the arts.

The Islamic culture in vivid contrast to the rural, feudal and solemnly ascetic life of most of Europe, was urban, commercial, exotic, cosmopolitan and in a word - modern. At the western end of the Islamic empire, Cordoba in Spain was almost as large as Baghdad, and its suburbs extended twenty-four miles along the river-bank. Its streets were paved with stone and lit with lamps, there were public gardens and

fountains, a plentiful water supply, sewers, public baths and a library. This, compared with the rest of Europe, where the towns were muddy, undrained, without public water supplies or sanitation; where few people could read or write, and baths and soap were unknown.

Most important of all for the development of science - the Islamic civilisation was a melting pot for learning, where the cultural traditions of India, Persia, Babylon, Egypt, the Byzantium empire, ancient Greece, and the Roman Empire were brought together under the patronage of one language, one way of life, and one common faith. A Muslim in any one of the many centres of learning scattered throughout the Islamic empire had the opportunity of studying the scientific records of almost all the ancient preceding civilisations. The mathematics, the astronomies, the medicines, the philosophies, in short almost the whole corpus of ancient knowledge and wisdom which evolved over millennia, merged together under the one common lore of Islam. This multi-cultural legacy was not merely preserved in Islamic culture, but its multi-various elements were united together in a spectacularly creative way. The science that emerged from this medieval cross-fertilisation of ancient cultures was completely unique. It in many ways surpassed the scientific achievements of any one of the individual cultures that gave birth to it - including the Greek heritage. Islamic science is a crucial phase in the development of modern science. Many of the methods and techniques now taken to be indispensable to science were first conceived in the Islamic era. Islamic civilisation is incontrovertible proof that important elements within the development of modern science are non-European in origin and help to show that modern science is a multi-cultural legacy - and not a Greco-Latin one.

Take for example what would now appear to be the most basic of all prerequisites to any science, namely numbers. So powerful a contribution did Islamic science make in this area that our present decimal numerical system is still referred to as "Arabic". In ancient times, a numerical system was largely derived from some form of finger-reckoning. The Roman number system is a good illustration of this; the Roman sign for five for example is closely associated with the V-shape formed by the fingers held together and the thumb extended. Although additional symbols such as "C" designating the Roman centum (one hundred)

simplify the number representation, numbers are "bundled" together to denote larger ones - and the system is cumbersome to read at a glance. The more advanced Babylonian sexagesimal number system operated on a base of sixty, and used the local position of numbers to construct larger ones (their relative positions denoted different base units of sixty). Our method of dividing time derives from this number system - the counting of seconds, minutes and hours.

Although the Babylonian system was definitely an advance on finger-reckoning systems, it was not until the idea of "zero" appeared as part of a digit within the number, which the Babylonians had merely denoted by a "blank", that a revolution occurred within number counting. This decimal system of counting was first used by Indian mathematicians and passed on to the Islamic civilisation during the Middle Ages.

The contribution made by mathematicians working within the Islamic civilisation was to realise the inherent potential of the Indian decimal system, both to commerce and science, and to convert the number system into a visual code which allowed one to read a number at a glance. Al-Khwarizmi, a mathematician working in Baghdad in the 9th century, wrote the first handbook on what became known as the "Arabic numerals". It was introduced to the West by Leonardo Pisa in the 13th century. The term "algorithm" commonly used in mathematics, derives from Al-Khwarizmi's name. Al-Khwarizmi demonstrated basic arithmetical operations through the use of the decimal number system, and also included discussions on the principle of squares and roots. Al-Khwarizmi was followed by other Muslim mathematicians. The role of these mathematicians in the development of science is much more than being "transmitters" as western accounts often suggest. Through their work, the West came to understand the power with which mathematical operations could be expressed by the Indian system of counting - a feature which is arguably as valuable as the invention itself. The magnitude of this contribution to the development of modern science is momentous. It is difficult to imagine the motions of the stars, the vista of distances, angles, laws of motion etc. that are now computed in modern science, expressible in terms of Roman Numerals. This Indian-Islamic computing device plays a vital role in the history of science.

Another field of mathematical enquiry developed within medieval Islamic civilisation is the field of Algebra. The term "Algebra" comes from an Arabic word meaning the reduction and combining of parts, and was used by Al-Khwarizmi as the title of his best known mathematical treatise. The development of Algebra proved to be indispensable to the growth of modern science - particularly in the advance of physics during the 17th century. The two main mathematical traditions which played a crucial role in the 17th century scientific revolution was the Geometry developed by the ancient Greeks, and the Algebraic tradition developed within the Islamic civilisation.

The 17th century French mathematician, René Descartes, brought these two mathematical disciplines together in a powerful union through the creation of co-ordinate geometry. Shortly afterwards, the English physicist, Isaac Newton, further unified them in the development of his differential and integral calculus. These kinds of developments laid the foundation of mathematical physics since the 17th century to the present day. The notion of mathematical equations is so fundamental to science that it is difficult to imagine scientific progress without them. The principles underlying mathematical equations and the scientific potential of Algebra was first realised a millennium ago within Islamic culture.

Al-Khwarizmi detailed the possibilities inherent in the idea of an equation: the idea of adding or subtracting equal quantities on either side and maintaining the balance - like a weighing scale; or the principle of finding an unknown quantity through establishing this equilibrium condition in the equation. Al-Khwarizmi gave the West their first example of equations, systematically classified according to basic problems. Mathematicians after Al-Khwarizmi dealt with more advanced problems in Algebra, like the famous Poet-Mathematician Omar Khayyam, who formulated and solved cubic algebraic equations.

Algebra formed an essential complement to Greek Geometry in the development of 17th century science. Since then, Algebra has undergone an even greater transformation, and has gradually become more and more abstract and yet at the same time, a more and more powerful mathematical tool. The former ancient Greek primacy of Geometry in the

mathematics of pre-modern times has, in the modern era, largely been overtaken by methods deriving from Algebra.

Another Islamic-Indian contribution to the field of mathematics, also vital to the development of modern science is the discipline of trigonometry. Although the ancient Greeks had classified angles in terms of a table of chords, it was not until the development of trigonometry, based upon expressing angles in terms of the ratio of the sides of a right-angled triangle - that angles were represented in terms of number ratios - and thus made the notion of angles less dependent on geometry, making them more abstract and flexible. Trigonometry was pioneered by Indian mathematicians, and once again illustrates a propensity of the Indian mind towards the more abstract. In mathematics, this tendency has proved to be immensely beneficial. Al-Khwarizmi published Indian astronomical tables where the trigonometric functions sine and tangent were employed. Later mathematicians and astronomers within the Islamic civilisation derived important mathematical relations between trigonometric functions of different angles, and along with planar trigonometry, also developed spherical trigonometry.

Tables of trigonometric functions were initially applied to measure angles within the field of astronomy - they were later used by the 16th and 17th century pioneers of modern science. Indeed, Copernicus devoted a complete section of his famous treatise "Revolutions" to the description of spherical trigonometry.

From the beginning of the 17th century scientific revolution, the power of trigonometry as a mathematical aid to physics and astronomy was immediately recognised, and trigonometry soon developed into a subject in its own right. It greatly aided the mathematical description of the laws of motion in Physics, and became a powerful and flexible way of expressing the phenomena of periodicity. The significance of this perhaps needs some explanation to the non-scientist. Wherever one looks, one cannot but help observe wave-like periodic motion in Nature. From the motion of ripples in a pond to the twinkling of a star (light is a wave of electromagnetic energy), Nature is filled with energy vibrating in periodic motion. Thus it was not until periodicity was made quantifiable, through the invention of trigonometry, that fundamental laws of Nature were expressible in

mathematical terms, and it is precisely this kind of advance in science which is recognised to be one of the key developments of modern science: namely its ability to describe Nature in more and more profound mathematical terms.

The mathematical developments undertaken within Islamic science in many ways surpassed the mathematical achievements of ancient Greeks. They opened up the possibility of describing Nature in more advanced and general mathematical terms, and paved the way for the scientific revolution of the 17th century. Their lasting impact on the modern world is evidenced by the fact that we still use them: the decimal system of numbers, the methods of Algebra and trigonometry.

The contributions of Islamic science in the field of optics is a good illustration that significant aspects to the "modern scientific method" were developed in the middle ages, within the Islamic civilisation, and not only in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. The most famous Islamic mathematician-physicist in this field was the 11th century born Ibn-al-Haitham, known as Alhazen in the Latin speaking world. Alhazen made discoveries that went well beyond the ancient Greek studies in this area, and at the same time tested his mathematical theories with a systematic method of experimentation. He inspired men like the English scientist-philosopher Roger Bacon in the 13th century to carry out similar scientific experiments, and also drew praise from men like the 15th century Italian Renaissance artist-engineer Leonardo da Vinci, and the 17th century German astronomer Johan Kepler for his contributions to science. Alhazen's theories in optics laid the foundation of the principles of perspective in the visual arts and his authority in the field of optics lasted well into the 17th century where it was further developed by Isaac Newton.

The Greeks had assumed that rays of light originated from the eye, whereas Alhazen established the fact that they leave the luminous object observed by the eye. He gave an accurate and detailed account of the operation of the eye and how it functioned. He also generalised the laws of the reflection of light from plane mirror surfaces to concave and parabolic ones, and related the laws of refraction to the solid density in which the light was deflected. This latter observation was extended to describe the

influence of the atmosphere on the light from luminous objects in the sky. He modelled problems in optics by mathematics. One such problem led to him solving a 4th degree algebraic equation by geometrical means and became known as the "Alhazen Problem" in the Latin speaking world. Performing experiments on his ideas, he constructed ingenious mechanical apparatus, like steel refractor lenses. In all this work, Alhazen displayed a degree of mathematical and experimental rigour which had not existed in ancient science and which greatly contributed to the development of modern science - six centuries before the emergence of the scientific revolution of the 17th century.

3. Man and Cosmos within Islamic Philosophy

The dramatic cultural differences between Latin Europe and the Islamic Civilisation in the early Middle Ages were reflected in their respective philosophies. The invading barbarians from the north obliterated almost all trace of ancient learning from most parts of Europe for over 600 years - only a few ancient manuscripts survived. Prominent among these were some of Plato's writings. During the collapse of Rome, a Nubian priest, St Augustine (345-430 AD) formulated a synthesis between Plato's philosophy and Christian theology which came to dominate Christian thinking up to the end of the first millennium AD. This "Neoplatonic" philosophy, as it is often termed, tended to emphasise the moral and spiritual side of man not simply alongside the study of Nature - but in place of it. Broadly speaking, the exercise of Reason to understand the operation of Nature was seen as a temptation to Sin. It was regarded with suspicion, as something which inherently detracted from man's main task, namely moral salvation.

It is important to realise here that the "Neoplatonic" philosophy that came to be associated with Augustine, did not regard thinking about the physical world as a possible way of uncovering deeper eternal truths, as Plato had taught, but looked upon the contemplation of the natural world as inherently sinful - it tended to divide man's moral nature from the rest of the cosmos. In Plato's philosophy although the natural world was an imperfect copy of the higher world of the Forms - there was nevertheless

the possibility, with the use of man's rational faculty, of finding eternal divine harmonies within it.

Just to what extent the division between science and religion in the Neoplatonic philosophy was inspired by Augustine himself is not clear. He himself explicitly stated that where there is a direct clash between a scientific fact and religious scripture, the religious scripture should be interpreted allegorically, and the scientific fact should be accepted. But where there is a clash between a scientific theory and scripture, the scriptural text should be read literally, and the scientific theory should be rejected⁸. But this distinction between a scientific theory and a scientific fact is of course, a matter of interpretation. Augustine for instance, did not accept the sphericity of the earth and the existence of the antipodes, because he thought it was in conflict with the unity of the human race, which was a teaching of the Bible⁹. Belief in a spherical earth had been accepted by many philosophers of ancient times such as Plato, but in the third and fourth centuries A.D, the belief in a flat earth became popular. Augustine in this respect, not only makes a poor judgement with respect to a scientific theory, but is also taking a questionable interpretation of biblical scripture. It is not clear why the belief in a spherical earth should contradict the Christian belief in the unity of the human race.

There are also other elements in Augustine's philosophy which encourage a division between science and religion. For Augustine, understanding the operation of Nature was regarded as "knowing for knowing's sake" and a temptation to be avoided:

"At this point I mention another form of temptation more various and dangerous... there can also be in the mind through those same bodily senses, a certain vain desire and curiosity, not taking delights in the body, but of making experiments with the body's aid, and cloaked under the name of learning and knowledge... Pleasure goes after objects that are beautiful to see, smell, taste, touch; but curiosity for the sake of experiment can go

⁸ Augustine, *"City of God"*, p xxxiii,

⁹ *ibid*

after quite contrary things, not in order to experience their unpleasantness, but through a mere itch to experience and find out... Thus men proceed to investigate the phenomena of nature - the part of nature external to us - though the knowledge is of no value to them: for they wish to know simply for the sake of knowledge... Certainly the theatres no longer attract me, nor do I care to know the course of the stars..."¹⁰

Here Faith is put above Reason. Both Reason and the world of Nature are separated from man's spiritual purpose. The dominant theme in Augustine's theology is Sin, the Fall of Man from Grace, his subsequent depravity and the Redemption possibility. In contrast to the Pythagorean belief of purifying the soul through the study of Nature, Neoplatonic theology seems to have the notion of purifying the soul by denying the world of Nature, or more precisely in the context of science, denying the impulse to study Nature. In another passage, Augustine states:

"When... the question is asked what we are to believe in regard to religion, it is not necessary to probe into the nature of things, as was done by those whom the Greeks call *physici*; nor need we be in alarm lest the Christian should be ignorant of the force and number of the elements - the motion and order and eclipses of the heavenly bodies... and a thousand other things which those philosophers either have found out or think they have found out... It is enough for the Christian to believe that only the only cause of all created things...whether heavenly or earthly is the goodness of the Creator, the one true God."¹¹

Although Augustine does not explicitly oppose scientific investigation, he warns against the danger of it becoming an end in itself, without serving the higher spiritual purpose, his philosophy was later interpreted by the medieval Christian community as opposing scientific enquiry. His

¹⁰ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p 90-1

¹¹ T. Golstein, *The Dawn of Modern Science*, p 57

theology was used to set religion against science for over 600 years in medieval Europe.

The anti-science theology of the church was not the only barrier to the development of science in early medieval Europe. The constant feuding, often involving wars led by ecclesiastical authorities against secular rulers did not create the stable social conditions under which science could flourish. Towards the end of the first millennium AD, the Papacy had succeeded in extending its dominion over a significant number of territories. These worldly concerns of the church were pursued in parallel with the austere world-denying salvation doctrine formulated by St Augustine, and were somehow set apart. Both these contradictory concerns, in their own ways, retarded the growth of science in Europe.

Shortly after Augustine's death, a monastic movement was started by St Benedict. The Benedictine Order, based upon withdrawing from the world and its inherent Sin, and instead, concentrating upon individual Salvation, was entirely in keeping with Augustine's philosophy. Yet at the same time, the Benedictine Order was cojoined to the political power struggles of the papacy. A Benedictine monk, later known as Gregory the Great, became Pope at the end of the 6th century and greatly expanded Papal power and its dominions. He was hostile to all forms of secular learning and was able to maintain a world-denying salvation theology while at the same time engaging in the expansion of Papal territories by acts of war¹².

The split-mind mentality of the early medieval outlook in Europe is also illustrated by the two different types of geographical maps that were then in circulation. On the one hand, the earth was portrayed as a tabernacle spread over areas which had no geographical existence, such as the garden of Eden - but had a theological significance; whereas on the other hand, there existed the geographically accurate Portolano charts which were used by Mediterranean seamen¹³. One type of map was almost entirely theological, while the other was entirely geographical. Both these maps, completely unrelated, existed side by side.

¹² B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p 372

¹³ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p 103

The divided worlds of the early middle ages also extended to cosmology. The universe was seen as a series of heavenly concentric rings along which the planets and the sun revolved around the earth. Each orbit consisted of a perfect circle with its axis through the earth's centre. Beyond the outer sphere, the ninth sphere, lay God's home the Heaven - or "Empireo". Although it was impossible to reconcile this cosmology with observation, the apparent irregularities of the orbits of the planets were dismissed as unimportant - the senses after all were part of a corrupt world which merely led man to commit sin - the senses were liable to deceive the true believer. The world had been corrupted by Man's fall from grace. From that time, the seasons appeared, earthquakes scourged the earth, disease and famine became rife - and if events in the night sky did not entirely fit into the scheme of the medieval heavenly cosmos, or if the coastlines of the continents did not appear on the medieval heavenly maps - this was due to the corrupt nature of man, a result of the First Sin.

Another dominant feature of the early medieval mind was that it moved within well-defined boundaries: in space; in time; and in terms of knowledge. In space, the ninth sphere was thought to act like a ceiling beyond which the physical universe did not extend. In time, the universe was believed to have been created some 5000 years in the past. The date of this Genesis act was thought to be clearly indicated in the Bible. The future of the universe was also seen to be finite - limited by the second coming of Christ, which the medieval mind had expected to occur in its foreseeable future (within generations). Religious knowledge was thought to have been revealed once and for all in biblical Scripture, while knowledge of Nature was thought of as being once and for all discovered by the Ancient Greeks.

This latter point is vital to the understanding of the history of science. For the early medieval European mind, scientific knowledge had been completed and was closed - just like their conception of religious truth. Science was not a matter for open investigation. Where it was to be pursued at all, it was regarded to be a matter of reference and classification. The Ancient Greeks came to have supreme authority - the revealers of Gospel truth in matters of science. Knowledge of the natural world was not a goal that the early medieval European mind attached a great deal of importance to, but if it were sought, it was to be sought in

the writings of the ancient Greeks, particularly in the writings of Plato. It is for reason of these "finite" features in the early medieval mind, that its world-view has sometimes been referred to as the "walled-in universe" - like a medieval town's outer wall which marked a clear physical enclosure around its inhabitants, the early medieval Christian mind placed mental boundaries upon its own thinking.

The early European medieval walled-in universe contrasted completely with the world-view of medieval Islamic culture. Within medieval Islam, the acquisition of knowledge was regarded to be religious injunction which Muslims were expected to follow. Knowledge was seen to be a divine attribute. The Muslim believed that only God possessed perfect or infinite knowledge, but since in Islamic tradition, as in Christian tradition, man was created in God's image: that God had breathed His spirit into man (S. XV:29), then man in striving to make himself more God-like would naturally strive to attain more knowledge. Knowledge in the medieval Islamic world was looked upon as an open-ended enquiry, and was inextricably bound to regarding Nature as part of God's handiwork and creation:

"It is He Who hath created for you all things that are on earth; moreover His design comprehended the heavens, for he gave order and perfection to the seven firmaments; and of all things he hath perfect knowledge." (S. II. 29)

In the Quran it is also stated that: "Are those who know equal with those who know not?" (S. 39:9). Such statements gave rise to many hadiths (sayings) in Islam which encouraged the attainment of knowledge. For instance, it was said that: "the quest of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim.", or that "verily the men of knowledge are the inheritors of the prophets", or "seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave". Injunctions such as "seek knowledge be it even in China" explain why Muslims were not only open to assimilating the learning of ancient cultures, but considered the gathering of such learning to be a sacred moral duty¹⁴.

¹⁴ , H.M. Balyuzi, *Muhammed and the Course of Islam*, p 291

In the Quran the "order and proportion" in the world of Nature, extends to the soul of man and is related to his task of soul-perfection:

"By the sun and his glorious splendour; by the moon as she follows him, by the day as it shows up the sun's glory; by the night as it conceals it; by the firmament and its wonderful structure; by the earth and its wide expanse; by the soul and the proportion and order given to it; and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its rights; - truly he succeeds that purifies it..." (S. XCI:1-9)

This celestial harmony in the universe and its natural link to the inner character of the soul is a central pillar of Islamic metaphysics: man is a natural part of the cosmos. Both man and the cosmos are signs of God, and both meet in the world of God. It is not just given to man to follow religious laws but also inherent in his character to share in the knowledge of "order and proportion", both in the cosmos and within his soul. It is a complete man, both moral and intellectual who looks to God for this unity:

"Who hath created, and further given order and proportion; who hath ordained laws, and granted guidance"
(S.LXXXVII:1-3)

Unity - at all levels, social, individual, cosmological is the alpha and omega of Islamic teaching. Both the universe and man are viewed as ultimately noble and spiritual. In a well-known verse in the Quran, God is presented as the "Light of the Universe" and at the same time a "Lamp" shining within the soul of man where his "radiance" is revealed in "layer upon layers" of light:

"Allah is the light of the heaven and earth. His light may be compared to a niche holding a lamp: the lamp is encased in glass, the glass shines like twinkling star. Its sacred oil... is luminous though the fire itself does not touch it. Thus we see his radiance in layer upon layer."(S.24:35)

Although the "Lamp" in this passage is often taken to refer to the prophet Mohammed, it is clear that it also refers to an inner lamp - one that shines within the soul of man. There is then, a profound harmony between the moral life of man and the study of the cosmos in Islamic tradition: the moral side of man is linked to God's presence within the soul of man - the divine spark within. The exercise of Reason unveils the hidden signs of God in the universe. Man is the meeting point between two universes, the universe within him, and the universe external to him. Both find a natural union in Islamic Faith - founded ultimately on divine unity.

In another famous passage from the Quran this unity is explicitly stated: "We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves"(S. 41:53) and in a well-known Islamic hadith it is stated that: "Dost thou think thyself a puny mortal form, when the universe is folded up within thee?"¹⁵. Such statements explain why knowledge of Nature in the Islamic civilisation was not a matter that was fixed by ancient authority as it had been for the early medieval mind in Christendom - for on matters of science as well as religion, only God was regarded as the ultimate authority.

Islamic philosophers, while encouraged to seek out knowledge and wisdom from wherever it came, did not regard it as final and complete but subjected it to critical review - looking always to develop it. This also explains the enthusiasm with which the world of Nature was studied in the Islamic civilisation. Nature was looked upon as a garden, rather like the heavenly gardens depicted in the Quran that await the devoted Muslim, whose multi-various forms, whose numerous "order and proportions" all reflect the presence of a heavenly light in the cosmos - and at the same time, shine within the soul of man, "layer upon layer".

The contrast between Christians and Muslims was also apparent in the way they regarded one another. While Christians were generally hostile to Muslims, and frequently justified their war against them by describing Muslims to be followers of the "Anti-Christ", Muslims had a much more enlightened view of Christians. In the Quran, Jesus is described as a

¹⁵ Attributed to Hussayn Ali, quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in, *The Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, p 34

righteous prophet (S 6:85), one having the same rank as Mohammed himself. Where the prophets are mentioned, the Quran explicitly states that "we make no difference between one and another of them" (S 2: 136). The disciples of Jesus are described as Muslims (S 5:111). Muslims are explicitly enjoined not to dispute with Christians, since their God is one and the same: "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book... But say, "We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; ... Our Allah and your Allah is One..." (S 29:46).

The light of Islamic learning only gradually filtered through into medieval Europe over a period of several centuries. It took four complete centuries before European thought was to become fully set aglow with the new Islamic spirit of learning.

At first, around the end of the first millennium AD, only isolated rays penetrated the ascetic gloom of the medieval Christian European mind; in the twelfth century, as a result of the contact made through the crusades, more Europeans were attracted to the Eastern light, and undertook journeys to find it; in the 13th century, schools of thought grew up in Europe which started to reject the former Augustinian theology for a new one based upon the Islamic world-view; and in the period from the 14th to the 16th centuries, the influence of the Islamic civilisation on Latin speaking Europe effloresced into the European Renaissance.

One of the first Europeans to seek out Islamic learning was a Frenchman known as Gerbert of Aurillac. He went to Catalonia in Spain to study Islamic mathematics and astronomy in the 10th century. His journey to learn from Muslims became famous, for in 999 AD he ascended to the Papal throne and contributed towards raising the appreciation of scientific study amongst the medieval Christian clergy. The historian, David Knowles, writing on the influence of Gerbert of Aurillac, states that, "The first great name in the history of medieval thought is that of Gerbert of Aurillac, who was master of the school of Rheims c.972, and ended his life as Pope Silvester (999-1003 AD). In his writing on logic, and still

more in his mathematical interests and his use of Arabian sources, he was the harbinger of many new things"¹⁶.

In the 12th century, a steady trickle of European scholars undertook the journey across the French border into Spain and across the Mediterranean sea to Sicily, in order to translate Arabic texts into Latin. One such man, an Englishman named Adelard of Bath, brought back a collection of manuscripts from his travels, which included Greek mathematical treatises such as Euclid's famous book, "Elements". But it was mainly the underlying philosophy behind Islamic science that these scholars brought back to Latin speaking Europe at this time. The mathematics that was then in use in medieval Islamic culture was not properly appreciated until after the 14th century onwards in the rest of Europe. In contrast to most Europeans of his time, Adelard of Bath declared:

"Of course God rules the universe, but we may and should enquire into the natural world. The Arabs teach us that."¹⁷

Adelard of Bath stated that he had learned to put Reason above ancient authority from his Arab teachers in matters of natural knowledge, since in fact the ancients, who possessed authority, had themselves gained it through the operation of Reason.

During the gradual reconquest of Spain launched by Christendom in the 12th century, European scholars began to discover the glitter of the Orient - coming from their solemn ascetic perspective, it must have seemed as if suddenly a window had been opened up on to an exotic life of a new world. In the territories that had been reconquered, traces of Islam could be found: in the elaborate ceramic decor of colourful facades, under the horseshoe arches, the gardens, the mosques - and most important of all for the development of science - in the libraries.

In the Islamic centres of learning the medieval European scholars found a wealth of ancient learning, together with insightful commentaries,

¹⁶ D. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p 85-6

¹⁷ Adelard of Bath, edited by C. Burnett, p 16

containing a vast array of scientific material which had been completely unknown to the Latin speaking world. A translation centre was initiated at Toledo by Alfonso VII, King of Castile and Leon, a farsighted monarch, who thus greatly aided the flow of Islamic learning to other parts of Europe. The overall effect of this transmission of learning was to start an intellectual revolution without parallel in European history.

In the 12th century, although the benefits of Islamic science were still dimly recognised, a school of learning was founded in the French town of Chartres, close to Paris. The school was originally founded by Fulbert, a pupil of Gerbert of Aurillac. Fulbert was a bishop in Chartres from 1006 to 1028 AD and became well known for laying down a programme of a wide literary and philosophical culture, harmonised to biblical teachings.

At Chartres, the very beginnings of an intellectual revolution started to take shape in Latin speaking Europe. Soon afterwards, the first European universities at Pisa, Paris, Oxford, Bologna and Padua were modelled on the Islamic centres of learning in Baghdad and Cordoba.

The scholars working at the school of Chartres, influenced by the newly acquired sources of Islamic-Greco learning that found its way across the French border from Spain, began to articulate a philosophy based upon the fundamental harmony between Reason and Faith. William of Conches, a leading figure in the Chartres school of learning stated:

"I take nothing away from God: He is the author of all things, evil excepted. But nature with which He endowed His creatures accomplishes a whole scheme of operations, and these too turn to His glory since it is He who created this very nature."¹⁸

He had clearly been influenced by the Islamic injunction to seek knowledge when he stated that: "To seek the reason of things and the laws of their origins is the greatest mission of the believer"¹⁹.

¹⁸ T. Goldstein, *The Dawn of Modern Science*, p 82

¹⁹ *ibid*, p 87

The school of Chartres, a religious institution, was one of the first in medieval Latin Christendom to be influenced by Islamic learning. The commonly held notion today that the medieval church only retarded the growth of science is an inaccurate simplification of the state of science in the medieval period - a frequent modern misconception. It is true that the scholars at Chartres did receive religious opposition to their new philosophy, but in their defence, they appealed to the very same authority from which the opposition drew - namely Christian scripture. They emphasised aspects within Christian scripture which were different to the austere ascetic world-denying ones. They stressed the harmony of Reason and Faith, and not the rejection of Reason in the name of Faith, as the medieval followers of Augustine's theology had tended to do. The scholars of Chartres did not make any major scientific discoveries, but they do mark a significant change in the intellectual climate of medieval Christian Europe. They can rightly be regarded as the first scholars within a centre of learning in Latin medieval Christendom which arose to redress the imbalance between Reason and Faith that prevailed in the early middle ages in Europe, and as such, represent the first major wave of Islamic influence in Christian Europe.

4. Scholastic Harmonies

In 13th century Latin speaking Europe, the steadily increasing influence of the Islamic civilisation gave rise to a distinctive philosophical school of thought known as "scholasticism". Accounts of scholasticism in the history of science often present it as an alliance between Aristotle's philosophy and Christian theology. It is claimed that the rediscovery of Aristotle's writings in Europe through Latin translations (made from Arabic texts) started a major European intellectual revival, of which scholasticism formed the first part. Aristotle's vast array of empirical studies on Nature, his use of rational and logical principles to classify and catalogue these observations, are thought to have loosened the hold of Augustine's "world-denying" theology over the medieval Christian mind²⁰. But this view betrays an overt European bias. It is undeniably true that

²⁰ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p 109

Aristotle's writings exercised a strong influence over the 13th century scholastic minds - he was the most respected of all philosophers and was simply known as "The Philosopher", just as St Paul was referred to as "The Apostle". But having recognised this fact, it is also true that the scholastic system of philosophy in all its essential characteristics, existed long before the 13th century Christian "schoolman" had "rediscovered Aristotle".

For over three centuries immediately preceding the 13th century, Islamic philosophers had pioneered the integration of Greek philosophy with Islamic theology, gradually refined the resulting metaphysics, and passed it on to the Latin speaking world in the form of commentaries on major Greek works, or in the form of theological writings that accompanied numerous Islamic scientific treatises. It is a testimony to the profound unity existing between the Quran and Bible - often poorly acknowledged by Christians and Muslims themselves, that Christian scholasticism in all its major features, is identical to Islamic scholasticism. There is indeed considerable irony in this fact, since medieval Christendom had launched a series of crusades - Holy Wars against the Islamic "infidels". Yet increased contact with these "infidels" not only "civilised" the Christian world in matters of science and philosophy, but also helped to initiate a reformation in the Christian theological medieval world-view. Broadly speaking, the impact of Islam on medieval Christianity redressed the imbalance between Faith and Reason which had existed in the philosophy of St Augustine.

Islamic medieval philosophers considered the study of Nature to be a religious duty which led to the recognition of God's signs in the cosmos. They saw the rational faculty of man as the "light of God" within the human temple, and also looked upon its use as a sacred activity. This contrasted sharply with early medieval Christian theology which regarded the study of Nature as a temptation to Sin. The most important feature of scholasticism is that it was first and foremost a religious revival, and only secondly an intellectual renewal. In fact the two were inseparably linked. In this sense, the rise of Christian scholasticism is an important precursor not only to the Renaissance, but more significantly to the Reformation. Just as Muslims pointed to the Quran as their only authority in matters of knowledge and wisdom, Christians started to point to the Bible as the

ultimate authority in their science and religion, as opposed to ancient manuscripts, or papal authority.

The Reformation and the Renaissance were two great changes in Europe which were interdependent, and were two sides of the same coin. They were both revolts against authority, based upon establishing fundamental rights of the individual: the right to interpret scripture according to one's own conscience, and the right to interpret the "book of nature" according to one's own reasoning and observations. Medieval Christendom was stirred into this spiritual and intellectual rebellion by the influence of the Islamic civilisation. The change in the Christian medieval religious world-view, inspired by Islam, provided the metaphysical foundation on which modern science was built, and was one that was able to harmonise Reason and Faith, and not emphasise one at the detriment of the other.

One of the most influential of Islamic philosophers in medieval Christendom was Averroes, an 11th century jurist, physician and philosopher from Cordoba in Spain. Averroes became so well known for his commentaries on Aristotle's works, that he was simply referred to as "The Commentator". His writings aroused considerable anti-clerical opposition and generally caused upheaval among the intelligentsia in 13th century Latin speaking Europe. During the 1270s, students and faculty members at Paris were defying traditional teaching under his name. The writings of Averroes were looked upon as subversive doctrines by 13th century church establishments and were condemned in an explicit list of 219 "errors"²¹. Different groups, first in France, and then later in Italy became known as "Latin Averroists".

The main themes pursued by Averroes in his writings were related to demonstrating the intrinsic harmony between Reason and Faith, to extol Muslims to study Nature as a sacred duty, and to promote the use of rational and logical principles in this study. He constantly referred to the Quran as his source of authority for these teachings. For instance, in a treatise entitled "Kitab fasl al-maqal" (on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy), he states that the Quran enjoins Muslims to study Nature, use rational principles, and make use of ancient wisdom:

²¹ T. Goldstein, *The Dawn of Modern Science*, p 125

"That the Law summons to reflection on beings, and the pursuit of knowledge about them, by the intellect is clear from several verses of the Book of God (Quran), Blessed and Exalted, such as the saying of the Exalted, "Reflect, you have vision" (Quran S. LIX,2) this is textual authority for the obligation to use intellectual reasoning.....Another example is His saying "Have they not studied the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever things God has created." (Quran S. VII, 185)...therefore we are under an obligation to carry on our study of beings by intellectual reasoning... From this it is evident that the study of the books of the ancients is obligatory by Law... "²²

The Law here, refers to an explicit commandment of God, and is for a Muslim the greatest possible form of injunction. Another central feature to the philosophy of Averroes is the proposition that theology and philosophy cannot contradict one another. It is not merely the stance of holding the two to be compatible, but the view that they cannot conflict - as a matter of principle. His position on matters where theology and philosophy appear to conflict is to interpret Scripture allegorically. He says: "Muslims accept the principle of allegorical interpretation, they only disagree about the extent of its application"²³. For Averroes, the use of Reason in studying Nature can only reveal the handiwork of God. He likens Nature to be a piece of art which glorifies the Artisan:

"If the activity of 'philosophy' is nothing more than study of existing beings and reflection on them as indications of the Artisan, i.e. inasmuch as they are products of art (for beings only indicate the Artisan through our knowledge of the art in them, and the more perfect this knowledge is, the more perfect the knowledge of the Artisan becomes), and if the Law has encouraged and urged reflection on beings, then it is clear that what this

²² Averroes, *On the Harmony of Science and Philosophy*, p 44-5

²³ *ibid.*, p 51

name signifies is either obligatory or recommended by the Law."²⁴

In another passage he states that "true science is knowledge of God":

"You ought to know that the purpose of Scripture is simply to teach true science and right practice. True science is knowledge of God... Right practice consists in performing the acts which bring happiness and avoiding the acts that bring misery and it is knowledge of these acts that is called practical science".²⁵

Thus for Averroes there is a fundamental unity between science, religion and living a moral life. All are different forms of "science", and all are inextricably linked together in the "knowledge of God". This view was characteristic of all the great medieval Islamic philosophers and contain the essential principle of scholasticism - a universal sense of divine unity. Although the main thrust of Averroism was at first opposed by medieval Christian institutions in the 12th and 13th centuries, it was thereafter gradually incorporated into Christian doctrine.

The great Persian theologian, philosopher and physician, Avicenna, born 1080 AD, was also well known to medieval Christendom in the 12th and 13th centuries. Apart from his treatises in science, some of which remained standard text in the field of medicine up to the 17th century in medieval Europe, he was particularly influential in moral philosophy and theology - in such subjects as analysing rational proofs for the existence of God and the Soul.

In his treatise "On the existence of the Soul", he argued that Reason is the most important of all human characteristics and that it is essentially a spiritual phenomenon - immortal, and a sign of God within Man. He formed a synthesis between Greek thought, particularly Aristotelian and Islamic theology, which was to become very influential in Latin speaking

²⁴ Averroes, *On the Harmony of Science and Philosophy*, p 44

²⁵ *ibid*, p 63

Europe. The religious character of man's reasoning power was described in the following way:

"The activity most distinctive to the human soul is knowing consciousness. It has many uses, including acknowledgement, recognition, and worship of God. For when a person knows his Lord in thought, apprehends His identity in the mind, sees His grace mentally, by of reason, he ponders the very essence of God's creative act. One sees the perfection of the Truth Itself in the celestial bodies and supernal substances, recognising that they are the most perfect of all created things... one sees in one's own rational self a being akin to the very eternity and rationality of the heavenly bodies, and one rises in thought to the Commanding Word of the Unseen and recognises that command as well as creation are His, as He says, "Are not creation and command His?" (Quran 52:7). For the flowing forth of creation is entailed by His command".²⁶

In this passage, it is clear that the rational self is a divinely created self which of all human qualities bears the most likeness to God, unlike the situation in Augustin's philosophy, where the Greek emphasis on reason was seen to be contrary to the spiritual path of salvation. For Avicenna, use of reason was a spiritual act, and significantly, he quotes the Quran for the source of this belief.

The rationalism of the 17th century underlying the world-view of the pioneers of the scientific revolution was profoundly shaped by Avicenna's philosophy. For instance, Descartes's famous "Cogito ergo sum" (I think therefore I am), demonstrating the primacy of the mind over the senses derived much from Avicenna's "floating man" example:

"One of us must suppose that he was just created at a stroke, fully developed and perfectly formed but with his vision shrouded from perceiving all external objects -

²⁶ Lenn E. Goodman, *Avicenna*, p 167

created floating in the air or in space, not buffeted by any perceptible current of the air that supports him, his limbs separated and kept out of contact with one another, so that they do not feel each other. Then let the subject consider whether he would affirm the existence of his self. There is no doubt that he would affirm his own existence, although not affirming the reality of any of his limbs or inner organs, his bowels, or heart or brain, or any external thing. Indeed he would affirm the existence of this self of his while not affirming that he had any length, breadth or depth. And if it were possible for him in such a state to imagine a hand or any other organ, he would not imagine it to be a part of himself or a condition of his existence."²⁷

By imagining a situation where all sensory stimulation is withdrawn, Avicenna concluded that the mind is in some sense more fundamental to the human self than the body. It is closely related to attempting to doubt the existence of the senses, as done for instance, in the philosophy of Descartes. This "floating man" example was widely discussed in medieval Christendom, and Descartes would have certainly been familiar with it. Of course, within the Christian tradition, Augustine had already articulated the primacy of the mind over the senses²⁸. But Augustine de-emphasised human reasoning with respect to man's goal of salvation, and even referred to it as a "temptation to sin", so that theologically, Reason was faulty. Avicenna on the other hand, described the rational faculty as a way of discovering God's signs in the universe, and it was this latter approach that was to become characteristic of the 17th century pioneers of science.

In his arguments for the existence of God, Avicenna not only discussed considerations that relate to the First Cause or the inherent Design in the universe, but also provided a version of what has come to be known as the "Ontological argument for the existence of God" which was later developed by St Anselm in the 13th century. This argument, in keeping

²⁷ Lenn E. Goodman, *Avicenna*, p 155

²⁸ B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p 353

with the mind being a sign of God in the cosmos - demonstrates the existence of God - based upon the idea of God²⁹. Rational arguments for the existence of God became a prime activity for Islamic scholastic philosophy and was continued in Jewish and Christian scholasticism.

Roger Bacon, the 13th century Englishman, already mentioned in connection with Islamic science, and famous for being one of the first to use modern scientific methods in Christian medieval Europe, referred to Avicenna as "the prince and leader of philosophy"³⁰. Apart from performing many experiments based on Alhazen's work in optics, he is well-known for his accurate predictions on what science would discover. Notably, Roger Bacon cited Avicenna and Averroes to support the view that scientific knowledge was not to be argued from ancient authority but must entail the independent use of Reason³¹.

Another sign of the respect and influence that Avicenna and Averroes held amongst the Christian scholastics was that in "Inferno", the famous work of the 14th Italian poet Dante, they were consigned to Purgatory, rather than Hell - this was an unusually high position to occupy for mere "infidels".

In connection with understanding the impact of Islamic philosophy on medieval Christendom, a point needs to be made on how the conflict of science and religion appeared to the medieval mind in general. A scientific way of looking at the world was identified with the work of Aristotle, and the harmony of science and religion was in large measure translated into the issue of whether Aristotle's philosophy was consistent with religious scripture. This explains why certain passages from Aristotle's writings, relating to the eternity of the universe or human immortality, became the focus of theological controversy, first in Islam, and then later in Judaism and Christianity.

²⁹ Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p 26-37

³⁰ B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p 456

³¹ *ibid.*, p 456

From the modern point of view, there is no scientific evidence which favours the eternity of the universe hypothesis, as opposed to the one based upon creation in time. But in the medieval period, the eternity of the universe was the scientific world view, for no reason other than that Aristotle had stated it to be so. Islamic philosophers, who advocated the Aristotelian world-view, such as Averroes and Avicenna, felt the need to clarify Islamic doctrines with respect to it, and set out to demonstrate that the Quran was consistent with Aristotle's philosophy. Avicenna for instance, argued that the creation of the universe is not to be viewed in time, but in terms of causation. The chain of causes that gives rise to the universe occurs not in time, but in terms of priority, that is, the universe is a timeless effect emanating from a cause lying outside time. Others within the Islamic world did not agree with him, and so a debate between the orthodox Muslims and the "philosophers" ensued.

Another area where Aristotle's writings set off a medieval theological controversy was with respect to the "Active Intellect" or "Agent Intellect". In his *De Anima*, Aristotle suggested that there was a passive and active part to the human rational soul, and human thinking arose out of the influence of the active part, an immortal entity known as the Active Intellect, on the passive part. The controversial element to this philosophy was that Aristotle appeared to imply that the Active Intellect was located outside the human mind.³² Exactly what Aristotle had intended to mean is not clear from the original text, and a variety of different interpretations are possible. Averroes interpreted the Active Intellect to lie outside the human mind, and describes the human mind in mainly passive sensory terms. The Active intellect from this point of view, is the same for all mankind. Averroes' view appeared to reject personal immortality, and was thus brought into conflict with the orthodox religious view of the soul surviving death. His view bears resemblance to the "Atman" of Hinduism, which is often presented to be an impersonal entity transcending individual consciousness and individual identity. Avicenna on the other hand, located the immortal part of the soul within the human mind, which although inspired by the Active Intellect, was nevertheless, separate from it. Avicenna placed the Active intellect in a hierarchy of "divine emanations" where it took tenth place down a chain of causes which

³² Aristotle, *De Anima*, III, 5, 430a 10-25

emanated from God. Averroes' view in particular aroused opposition, both from within Islam, and later amongst Jews and Christians.

Averroes and Avicenna formed only a part of the long line of Islamic philosophers who developed scholastic philosophy over three centuries. The works of philosophers such as Al-Kindi, a 9th century Arab philosopher, and Al-Farabi, a 9th century Turk, were also known to the medieval Latin speaking world. Their commentaries on the scientific and religious aspects of ancient Greek philosophy, particularly on the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and how they were related to Islamic theology, helped to shape the chrysalis from which Christian scholasticism grew. They were by no means all in agreement. Al-Kindi wrote in favour of the creation *ex-nihilo* doctrine, while Al-Farabi advocated the eternity of the universe. But more importantly, they were united in their openness towards secular learning. Al-Kindi for instance wrote, "we should not be timid in praising truth and in seeking it, from wherever it may come, even if be from distant races and people different from us"³³.

Al-Kindi concentrated on demonstrating the Unity of God. He gave many examples of the different types of unity known to man, and argued that the Unity of God was the most noble and singular amongst them. Like all other Islamic philosophers he put the attainment of Wisdom before the acquisition of knowledge. This was another major characteristic of scholastic philosophy. Although the acquisition of knowledge was encouraged by scholastics, it took second place to the "First Philosophy" (spiritual wisdom) which was regarded as the most important kind of knowledge. Al-Kindi stated:

"The noblest part of philosophy and the highest in rank is the First Philosophy, is knowledge of the First Truth who is the cause of all truth. Therefore it is necessary that the perfect and most noble philosopher will be the man who fully understands this most noble knowledge; for the knowledge of the cause is more noble than knowledge of the effect..."³⁴

³³ S. M. Afnan, *Avicenna*, p 25

³⁴ A. L. Ivry, *On First Philosophy: Al-Kindi*, p 56

There is a certain irony here when the above statement is compared to the modern approach of acquiring knowledge from identifying causes. The process of scientific investigation seems to move along a chain of causes, where each newly discovered cause is in some sense more profound than the previous ones. The chain of causes uncovered by science seems to proceed along in a direction of greater simplicity, where the number of causes used to explain the world around us is constantly decreasing in number. The notion of a First Cause is but a natural extension of this process. The ultimate goal of all scientific investigation would of course, be to uncover a single cause, which could explain the range of our entire experience: explain ourselves, the universe, and our relationship to it. Viewed in this way, science and religion do not oppose one another, rather, religion starts where science ends.

Before Islamic medieval thought inspired the rise of Christian scholasticism, it proved to be the source behind the reformation period of another of the world's major religions, namely Judaism. The flowering of Jewish scholasticism in the 11th and 12th centuries took place under the auspices of the caliphate of Cordoba, and is another example of the fundamental religious unity existing between the Quran and the Bible: the golden age of Jewish philosophy echoed all the major scholastic themes already developed by Muslim philosophers. Jewish philosophers not only acted as a bridge between Eastern and Western medieval thought but also greatly added to it. From within their own Hebraic tradition, they affirmed the major tenets of scholastic thought and as in the case of their fellow Muslim compatriots around the same period, many of their scientific advances were founded upon this scholastic metaphysical ground.

The period of greatest stability for the Jews living in Spain occurred in the 10th century. At this time, the opulent Caliphs gave special consideration to philosophy and poetry. They protected their Jewish subjects by law, and allowed them to compete for the acquisition of wealth and honour on the same terms as their Muslim fellow-citizens. The learning of science, philosophy and poetry was consequently cultivated by the Jews with the same zest as by the Arabs. This period of religious enlightenment was crucial to the cultural progress inspired by Islam. Many of the philosophers and scientists who contributed to Islamic learning were actually Jews. In fact, so intermingled was their contribution with their

Muslim fellow-citizens; that when the Christian West came to absorb Islamic learning from Spain, they frequently mistook Jewish writers and philosophers to be Muslims.

But in the 11th century, some Caliphs began forcibly to convert Jews to Islam, and many Jews fled to neighbouring countries. Of course, this persecution was still mild compared to the mass pogroms of Jews that occurred within medieval Christian communities. For the most part, both Jews and Christians were able to live in comparative safety and freedom under Islamic rule. When the Muslims were not preoccupied with converting the Jews to their faith, both Jews and Muslims benefited.

The dominant concern of Jewish scholasticism, as with Islamic scholasticism before it, was to demonstrate the harmony of science and religion. This characteristic was the motivating force behind the most famous of all Jewish scholastics, Maimonides, born at Cordoba in 1135 AD. Maimonides wrote in Arabic, as did most Jewish philosophers living in Spain. He frequently cited Islamic philosophers, with whose works he seemed to be quite well acquainted. In his, "Guide for the Perplexed", a long treatise written to demonstrate the unity between Jewish theology and Greek philosophy, he gave many reasons for studying science, each supported by references to the Torah. For example, he stated that:

"You will certainly not doubt the necessity of studying astronomy and physics, if you are not desirous of comprehending the relation between the world and Providence as it is in reality, and not according to imagination... Consequently he who wishes to attain human perfection, must therefore study Logic, next the various branches of Mathematics in their proper order, then Physics, and lastly Metaphysics... The necessity of such a preparation and the need for such a training for the acquisition of real knowledge, has been plainly stated by King Solomon in the following words: "If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength; and it is profitable to prepare for wisdom" (Eccles x. 10); "Hear counsel and receive

instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end"
(Prov. xix. 20)³⁵

Here, the studying of different sciences, Logic, Mathematics etc. are not only linked to the many counsels of acquiring wisdom in the Old Testament, but stated to be an important preparation for understanding scripture. Maimonides thought by studying the universe, traces of God could be found:

"Nothing exists except God and this universe, and that there is no other evidence for His existence but this universe in its entirety and in its several parts. Consequently the universe must be examined as it is, the propositions must be derived from those properties of the universe which are clearly perceived, and hence you must know its visible form and nature. Then only will you find in the universe evidence for the existence of a being not included therein".³⁶

But Maimonides like all other philosophers within scholasticism only saw the acquisition of such knowledge as a means to a spiritual end - an instrument to acquire spiritual wisdom. He stated that:

"If the person does not know the measure of the cone, or the sphericity of the sun, it is not so important as not to know whether God exists, or whether the world exists without a God."³⁷

Hence, scientific knowledge for Maimonides was always moderated by divine knowledge. He explained that the holding of a higher principle to the attainment of scientific knowledge should not deter one from studying science:

³⁵ M. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, p 46

³⁶ *ibid.*, p 113

³⁷ *ibid.*, p 43

"It was not the object of the Prophets and our Sages in these utterances to close the gate of investigation entirely, and to prevent the mind from comprehending what is within its reach, as is imagined by simple idle people, whom it suits better to put forth their ignorance and incapacity as wisdom and perfection... The whole object of the Prophets and the Sages in these utterances was to declare that a limit is set to human reason where it must halt."³⁸

He explains that in Jewish scripture, the acquisition of knowledge is often symbolically referred to by the taste of honey: "My son eat thou honey, because it is good, and the honeycomb... so shall the knowledge of wisdom be unto thy soul." (Prov. xxiv:13,14). Through the imagery of honey, Maimonides explains that Jewish scripture counsels moderation in the acquisition of knowledge: "Though great, excellent, noble and perfect, it is injurious if not kept within bounds or not guarded properly..."³⁹. He quotes scripture to support this interpretation: "It is not good to eat too much honey" (Prov. xxv. 27). These passages underlie a general core principal of scholasticism, in this case illustrated from the Jewish perspective: that knowledge was regarded as the servant of wisdom, and the attainment of wisdom was part of a wider spiritual quest. This search for wisdom did not detract from science, but nourished it.

On the subject of the eternity of the Universe, Maimonides was committed to the creation ex-nihilo doctrine, and thought that it was implied by Judaic doctrine. On the other hand, he felt the philosophical arguments often used to advocate it were faulty, and that in general, the arguments used by philosophers who favoured the eternity of the universe were much stronger. He thought that Aristotle had only proposed the eternity of the universe as a theory, and not stated it to be a fact. He set about both showing the limitations of the creation ex-nihilo and eternity of the universe arguments. In his discussion, his reference points were schools of thought within Islam.

³⁸ M. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, p 43

³⁹ *ibid.*, p 43

Maimonides discusses weaknesses in the arguments of a certain Muslim theological school called the 'Mutakallemim', who advocated the creation ex-nihilo doctrine. He stated that their arguments were not consistent with the "laws of nature" and that they were based only upon religious bias.

He writes:

"The first Mutakallemim tried to prove a proposition when it was expedient to demonstrate its truth; and to disprove it, when its rejection was desirable, and when it was contrary to the opinion which they wished to uphold.... I tell you, however, as a general rule, that Themistius was right in saying that the properties of things cannot adapt themselves to our opinions, but our opinions must be adapted to the existing properties".⁴⁰

Not only did Maimonides think the Mutakallemim to be unscientific, but objected to them using the ex-nihilo doctrine to prove the existence of God. In fact, in connection with arguments concerning the existence and qualities of God, Maimonides preferred the writings of the "philosophers". These philosophers were Muslims, such as Al-Farabi. Maimonides specifically cites Al-Farabi on several occasions, whom he refers to as "Abunazar Al-Farabi". In one instance, he states that many of the arguments against the Mutakallemim had already been developed by Al-Farabi. Writing on the weakness of a Mutakallemim proposition, he states, "Yet all these things have no reality and are mere fictions. Abunazar Al-Farabi in criticizing this proposition, has exposed all its weak points, as you clearly perceive, when you study his book on the changeable beings earnestly and dispassionately"⁴¹.

Although Maimonides criticises the philosophy of the Mutakallemim, he indicates that many Jews had accepted their beliefs and had not produced any original philosophy of their own. Writing of Jewish scholars, he wrote, "they followed the lead of the Mohammedian Mutakallemim, and what they wrote is insignificant in comparison with the kindred works of

⁴⁰ Moses Maimonides, *The guide for the Perplexed*, p 110

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p 138

the Mohammedians"⁴². In another passage, Maimonides states that some Jewish thinkers identified themselves with the 'Mu'tazilah', an Islamic theological school that flourished in the 8th and 9th centuries. In connection with the Islamic philosophers, he stated that "our Andalusian scholars followed the teachings of the philosophers, from whom they accepted those opinions which were not opposed to our own religious principles"⁴³. All this shows that Jewish scholasticism arose out of the matrix of Islamic scholasticism and was inextricably linked to it.

A profound theological resonance between the Quran and Torah lies in the unity and essential transcendence of God. It was in this connection that the philosophy of Maimonides had its lasting impact. He described the route to God in a negative way: that God was best understood in terms of what He is not. Maimonides stated, "Know that the negative attributes are the true attributes: they do not include any incorrect notions or any deficiency whatever in reference to God while positive attributes imply polytheism, and are inadequate... we cannot describe the Creator by any means except by negative attributes."⁴⁴. Maimonides cites scripture for this view, "To whom, then, will you liken me" (Isaiah xl. 25), or "There is none like unto Thee" (Jer. x. 6)⁴⁵. This is of course, a point of unity between Muslims and Jews, and there are many similar passages in the Quran, such as Sura 42:9, where it is written of God that, "There is nothing like unto Him".

The Christian scholastics were generally not as well informed about Islamic theology and philosophy as their Jewish counterparts. Their approach was generally a hostile one. There were of course, obvious political reasons for this, very few Christians could be seen to praise the enemy. From the 13th century onwards, the learning that Christian Europe absorbed from Islam was not generally acknowledged to be Islamic, but claimed to be a combination of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology. All these points are clear in the works of the most

⁴² M. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, p 108

⁴³ *ibid.*, p 108

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p 81

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p 78

famous of all Christian scholastics, St Thomas Aquinas, a 13th century Italian priest.

Aquinas wrote the treatise, "Summa Theologiae" as an attempt to demonstrate the inherent harmony between Reason and Faith. On the one hand he encouraged the study of science stating for instance that: "There is a place for the authority of reason: the grace of God does not replace but fulfils it"⁴⁶, or elsewhere stating that: "We know God in all we know"⁴⁷. On the other hand, in characteristic scholastic tradition, he emphasised the limits to human reason: "God has destined us for a goal beyond the grasp of reason"⁴⁸.

Aquinas derived much of his knowledge about Islamic philosophy from his Master, Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great), who lived in the early part of the 13th century. Albert Magnus was one of the greatest transmitters of Greek and Islamic philosophy to the Christian scholastic world, he spent over fifty years assembling one of the largest store houses of medieval learning in Europe. He frequently cited Avicenna in his works, to whom he referred with admiration and appreciation⁴⁹.

Aquinas, gives similar arguments to those presented by Muslim and Jewish scholastics before him, in describing how science and religion were compatible. The main message, that the use of reason unveils traces of God in the universe, and is in harmony with religious revelation, is in this instance, supported with references to Christian scripture. Aquinas gave four reasons, two of which are quoted below, of why he thought "consideration of creatures is useful for building up man's faith in God":

"This meditation on the divine works is indeed necessary in order to build up man's faith in God. First, because through meditating on His works we are able somewhat to admire and consider the divine wisdom. For things

⁴⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, p 3

⁴⁷ D. J. O'Connor, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, p 104

⁴⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, p 1

⁴⁹ Soheil M. Afnan, *Avicenna*, p 273

made by art are indications of the art itself, since they are made in the likeness to the art. Now God brought things into being by His wisdom: for which reason it is said in the Psalm: "Thou has made all things in wisdom" (Ps ciii: 24). Hence we are able to gather the wisdom of God from the consideration of His works, since by a kind of communication of His likeness it is spread abroad in the things He has made. For it is said (Eccles I:10), "He poured her out", namely wisdom, "upon all His works": wherefore the psalmist after saying: "The knowledge is become wonderful to me: it is high, and I cannot reach to it", and after referring to the aid of the divine enlightening, when he says: "Night shall be my light", etc., confesses himself to have been helped to know the divine wisdom by the consideration of the divine words saying: "Wonderful are Thy works, and my soul knoweth right well" (Ps cxxxviii: i-vi). Secondly, this consideration leads us to admire the sublime power of God, and consequently begets in men's hearts a reverence for God. For we must needs conclude that the power of the maker transcends the things made. Wherefore it is said (Wis. xiii:4), "If they", the philosophers, to wit, "admired their power and their effects", namely of the heavens, stars, and elements of the world, "let them understand....that He that made them is mightier than they". Also it is written (Rom. I: 29): "The invisible things of God.... are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made: His eternal power also and divinity". And this admiration makes us fear and reverence God. Hence it is said (Jerem. x.6, 7): "Great is Thy name in might. Who shall not fear Thee, O King of nations?"⁵⁰.

The above references to biblical scripture from one of the greatest expounders of Catholic theology, conveys exactly the same meaning as the scripture quoted by Maimonides, and those quoted by Avicenna and

⁵⁰ St Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, The second book, chapter 2, p2-3

Averroes from the Quran, and indicate a fundamental line of unity between the Islamic, Jewish and Christian Faiths. Aquinas was however, writing against the former tradition of Augustine. The core of his message was not accepted by the European Christians of his day. He acknowledged this, and he specifically cited Augustine for being in error with respect to separating the "truth of Faith" and "opinions one holds about creatures":

"Accordingly it is clear that the opinion is false of those who asserted that it mattered not to the truth of faith what opinions one holds about the creatures, so long as one has a right opinion about God, as Augustine relates in his book *De Origine Animae*: since error concerning creatures by subjecting the human mind to causes other than God amounts to a false opinion about God, and misleads the minds of men from God, to Whom faith strives to lead them"⁵¹.

The considerable influence that Islamic philosophers had on 13th century Christian theologians is also apparent on the issue of the Active Intellect and the nature of the human soul. Aquinas wrote a treatise entitled, "On the unity of the intellect against the Averroists"⁵². In it, he quotes from the works of Avicenna and Abu Hamid Al-Ghazzali, an 11th century sufi mystic Islamic theologian who lived in Bagdad. Ghazzali was known as Algazel in Christian Europe.

After citing the views of Avicenna and Algazel on the soul, Aquinas, states, "Now these things we have said first, not as though wishing to reject the above error by the text of the philosophers; but to show that not only the Latins, whose words some do not relish, but also the Greeks and the Arabs were of this opinion."⁵³. This citation indicates that Aquinas wrote his treatise not for Muslims, but for his fellow Christians who held

⁵¹ St Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, The second book, chap 3, p 6

⁵² St Thomas Aquinas, *On the unity of the intellect against the Averroists*

⁵³ *ibid.*, p 46-7

the writings of the "Greeks and Arabs" in great esteem, and who were committed to Averroes' conception of the human soul.

Elsewhere in the same treatise, Aquinas states, "Now what they [the Averroists], say is clearly false, namely that it was a principle among all philosophers, both Arabs and Peripatetic, though not among the Latins, that the intellect is not multiplied numerically. For Algazel was not a Latin, but an Arab. Avicenna, too, who was an Arab, speaks this in his book, *On the Soul*,..."⁵⁴. The Latin "Averroists" were particularly active at Paris in the 12th century, such as the Priest, Siger of Bibrant. Here, Aquinas also appears to be unaware that Avicenna was a Persian. He thought that Algazel wrote in support of Avicenna's works, by only having an incomplete part of Algazel's works. In fact, the opposite was true, Algazel's work, "On the incoherence of the philosophers", was actually a refutation of Avicenna's philosophy⁵⁵.

Although Aquinas had rejected Averroes' conception of the human soul, he had in large measure accepted the Avicennian hypothesis that the Active Intellect was located outside the human soul. Like Avicenna, he believed the human soul to be immortal and thought that the function of the Active Intellect was to inspire and cause progress in the soul. The Avicennian synthesis of the Aristotelian and Islamic doctrines of the soul was accepted by most Christian scholastics with minor modifications. The transmission of Avicenna's views, apart from Latin translations of his work *De Anima*, were made by some Christian theologians, such as the Italian priest Gundisalvi, who lived in Spain in the 11th century, and who was a translator of many Islamic works⁵⁶. Gundasalvi wrote a treatise entitled 'De Anima', where he essentially advocated an Avicennian doctrine of the soul. The historian D. Knowles notes that:

"The great scholastics of the mid-thirteenth century, who had been nurtured for the most part upon the Augustinian noetic...were now presented with a rich

⁵⁴ St Thomas Aquinas, *On the unity of the intellect against the Averroists*, p 72

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p 46

⁵⁶ D. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p 196-7

literature of the works upon the soul and its powers, stretching back from Gundisalvi and the Arabs to the works of Aristotle. Their first impulse was to apply the system of Avicenna to clarify that of Augustine, making of the agent intellect of the former the divine illumination of the latter. Then, when Averroes appeared, with his commentary on Aristotle, they were faced with new difficulties. Some, and among them, Siger of Bibrant, at least in the early stages of his career, adopted the Arabian philosopher's solution of the problem. Others, and chiefly Albert the Great, and Aquinas, while using both Avicenna and Averroes, based themselves on the pure doctrine of Aristotle's *De Anima*...⁵⁷

Aquinas claimed that he based his theology on the philosophy of Aristotle and the Bible, historically, this misleading interpretation of scholasticism has come to dominate European history. It is however, only partially true. Aquinas, as with his Master Albertus Magnus, largely adopted an Avicennian conception of the soul, where the religious doctrine of the immortality of the soul was combined with Aristotle's Active Intellect.

The 17th century pioneers of modern science were for the most part scholastic disciples. Their continual emphasis on science uncovering the handiwork of God; of the intrinsic harmony between Reason and Faith; the acquisition of Wisdom being the supreme human goal; the limits to human reason when compared to the world of God, all these sentiments echoed medieval scholastic philosophy. Moreover, the natural harmony between reason and faith incorporated in such a vision, was vital to the growth of modern science.

5. The Renaissance Man

It is often thought that the Humanist philosophy which lay behind the Renaissance was a rebellion against Scholasticism⁵⁸. But this was true

⁵⁷ D. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p197

⁵⁸ B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p 487

only with respect to the details of scholasticism and not with respect to its general principles. Those elements of scholastic philosophy which incorporated Aristotle's specific theories - such as his earth-centred cosmology, were overturned. But this did not destroy the foundation of scholasticism. In fact quite the reverse is true. The Renaissance was a time where much of the unity formulated within scholasticism came to fruition.

"L'uomo universale" of the Renaissance was artist, craftsman, philosopher, inventor, humanist, scientist, astronomer and monk all in one. Science, Religion and Art were so intermingled that it was difficult to distinguish between them. It is not easy to tell whether a drawing of Leonardo da Vinci was intended as a piece of art or for anatomical demonstration - it was seemingly for both. A similar situation existed for maps: were they pieces of art or drawn to guide travellers? The answer again seems to be both. In fact scientific developments evolved side by side with artistic innovations. Map projection for instance developed alongside perspective drawing for 150 years during the Renaissance period, both locked together in a mutually fruitful relationship. The construction of Gothic cathedrals united technical dexterity, artistic beauty, and spiritual aspiration - all in one. They epitomised the scholastic vision of Reason being harmoniously guided by Faith. They were all external symbols demonstrating the medieval belief in an inner universal order.

The inner spiritual aspirations of Renaissance man and his harmonious relationship to his environment take material form through the Gothic cathedral. The moral, the rational, the empirical, the artistic, the physical, all find union in a building directed towards the world of God.

Another common misconception concerning humanism is that it arose out of a resurgence of Plato's philosophy in Europe, and in particular, to the Pythagorean elements within Plato's philosophy. According to this view, the universe as a mathematical order, inherent in Pythagorean-Platonic philosophy began to replace the influence of Aristotelian Logic in European intellectual thought⁵⁹.

⁵⁹ E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Science*, p 52-3

While it is true that the humanist movement did place greater emphasis on mathematics rather than logic, this influence did not only come from ancient Greece. In fact the period between the 14th to 16th centuries saw the fresh translations of Islamic mathematical manuscripts into the Latin speaking world, and as a result, a renewed interest in mathematics in Europe was engendered. Both Algebra and Trigonometry were transmitted to medieval Christendom during this time. Biagio for example, an Italian mathematician, living in the 14th century, presented simple algebraic operations as a part of practical arithmetic. In the 15th century quadratic equations were solved by geometric means - as they had been in the Islamic civilisation. These developments in Islamic science were transmitted primarily via universities in Italy. Studies in trigonometry were made from Arabic texts by Regiomontanus, a German astronomer who lived in Northern Italy in the 15th century.

Regiomontanus made explicit use of the sine function, stated the laws of the sines, and wrote a treatise on spherical trigonometry, from which Copernicus is supposed to have borrowed but not acknowledged. Regiomontanus built his own astronomical observatory, and is regarded as one of the first astronomers in Latin speaking Europe who succeeded in treating astronomy as an exact science. The work of 17th century scientists drew much from his astronomical work. In fact Regiomontanus is known to have hinted at the notion of the motion of the earth, long before Copernicus formulated the heliocentric theory. Regiomontanus stated that: "It is necessary to alter the motion of the stars a little because of the motion of the earth"⁶⁰.

Another humanist, vital to the development of Renaissance science in the 15th century was the German ecclesiast-mathematician, Nicholas of Cusa, who also lived in Northern Italy. Nicholas of Cusa is most famous for his statements concerning the earth not being at the centre of the universe and being in motion. He made these statements at least twenty years before the Copernican theory was formulated. Nicholas of Cusa stated for instance, that:

⁶⁰ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p 212

"Since, then, the earth cannot be at the centre, it cannot be entirely devoid of motion... It is clear to us that the earth is really in motion though this may not be apparent to us, since we do not perceive motion except by comparison with something fixed."⁶¹

Neither did Nicholas of Cusa confine his thinking to Aristotelian principles of uniform motion, or circular Platonic celestial orbits, in which he was, in both respects, well ahead of his time - certainly far beyond the later conceptualisations of Nicholas Copernicus. Cusa maintained that:

"Moreover, neither the sun, nor the moon, nor any sphere - though to us it seems otherwise - can in (its) **motion describe a true circle, because they do not move around a fixed base...** nor is (anything) ever at one time (exactly) as at another, neither does it move in a precisely equal (manner)..."⁶²

Cusa also believed that stars were made of the same kind of materials found on earth, thus refuting the ancient Greek notion of the heavenly bodies being stainless and perfect. He stated for instance that:

"...It cannot be said that this place of the world (is less perfect because it is) the dwelling place of men, and animals, and vegetables that are less perfect than the inhabitants of the region of the sun and of other stars..."⁶³

In all these remarkable speculations, Nicholas of Cusa exhibited a rebellion against the traditional knowledge of his day. He based much of his speculations on the conception of the universe as a mathematical order, which has no natural centre and is unbounded. Cusa for instance stated that: "number is the first model of things in the mind of the

⁶¹ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p 209

⁶² *ibid.*, p 209-10

⁶³ *ibid.*, p 210

Creator"⁶⁴. Nicholas of Cusa gained much of his mathematical knowledge from Islamic sources. He read the Arabic language and was considered to be one of the most knowledgeable Europeans on the Islamic culture of his period. In fact Cusa wrote a treatise on the Quran in which he stated that the prophet Mohammed's impulse to be essentially good, and that the Quran had genuine religious merits. His treatise, although a Christian polemic against Islam, was nevertheless quite unlike the blatantly abusive Christian polemics against Islam of his period. Cusa favoured establishing a dialogue as a means of settling Islamic-Christian rivalries. In fact he was involved in Peace negotiations with the Turkish Islamic world in the hope of averting war in the early 15th century.

Cusa's dissatisfaction with the Ptolemaic theory was no doubt also influenced from the controversy surrounding the theory within the Islamic civilisation. Some Muslim philosophers objected to the Ptolemaic system on the grounds that it did not conform to the Aristotelian principles of uniform motion in its complex system of epicycles. Alternative astronomical schemes were devised which did not violate any Aristotelian principles of motion. Although these schemes were not successful, they were known to the Latin speaking world. It was precisely this controversy that led Averroes to state that: "The Ptolemaic astronomy is nothing so far as existence is concerned; but it is convenient for computing the non-existent"⁶⁵. Such statements would have been well-known to Cusa, and perhaps indirectly to Copernicus, who set about revising the Ptolemaic theory precisely for the reasons of it not conforming to the Aristotelian principle of uniform motion. At the Universities of Cracow and Bologna where Copernicus studied, the mathematical tradition of Cusa and Regiomontanus was very much alive. In fact Copernicus at the beginning of his "Book of the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres" had put the motto: "for mathematicians only"⁶⁶. There is no doubt that the wider influence of Islam, not just the rediscovery of ancient Pythagorean-Platonic harmonies within Latin speaking Europe, lay at the foundation of the humanistic movement of the Renaissance. Nicholas Rescher, in his

⁶⁴ E. A. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Science*, p 53

⁶⁵ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p 209

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p 222

book "Arabic Studies" has written of this Islamic influence in the following way:

"In the Italian Renaissance of the 15th to mid-16th centuries, Averroism exerted a great influence in the study of the philosophy of nature at Padua and Bologna, with the result that Arabic philosophy was operative as a significant force in the intellectual ferment that underlay the work of Galileo and saw the beginnings of modern science."⁶⁷

Single events in history rarely explain very much on their own. They may sometimes serve as a convenient marker to separate different periods in history, as events relating to the progress of science in the 17th century signify the beginning of a modern era in our history and the end of a medieval one. But such historical dividing lines are clearly plagued with an inherent degree of arbitrariness and inaccuracy. The dangers of compartmentalising history by these rough markers should always be borne in mind and one should be willing to revise the boundaries. Any historical event takes place in a wider scheme of beliefs and perceptions. Events are integrally linked to and formed out of a certain world-view, sometimes articulated, but more often than not, unexplicated. To choose a once popular turn of phrase, events are formed within a certain *Weltanschauung*. The roots of the modern scientific world go back much further than the 17th century. The background "*Weltanschauung*" from which the scientific discoveries of the 17th century were made, was initiated by the rise of Islam in Arabia, formulated in its essential characteristics under the spectacularly cosmopolitan Islamic culture, further developed as it gradually gave rise to Jewish and Christian scholasticism, and culminated in the explorations and historical revolts of the Renaissance. There is no simple dividing line between the medieval era and the modern one, just as there is no single culture from which the European Renaissance grew. The Renaissance is not European, neither is the 17th century uniquely modern compared to the centuries before it.

⁶⁷ N. Rescher, *Studies in Arabic Philosophy*, p 157

During the so-called "Dark Ages" in Latin speaking Europe, generally thought to be barren for the progress of science, vital technological developments were made from which the craft tradition of the European Renaissance grew. It was during this period for instance that the heavy-wheeled plough was invented, which allowed the use of horses in the process of ploughing, thus saving labour and time. The invention of the water-wheel also dates from this "Dark" period, which was subsequently used in Mills to grind corn, creating a food surplus - without which the building of towns, cathedrals, universities etc. during the Renaissance period could not have been carried out.

Opening up the scope for sea travel, the medieval inventions of the stern-post rudder, Lateen Sail, and bowsprit, enabled boats to be kept at sea for months on end. The historian Arnold Toynbee compares the increase in sea exploration with the steppe-borne horse used earlier by the Eurasian nomads in the following way:

"The steppe-borne horse had conveyed its nomad rider to the back doors of all the civilizations of the Old World; the Ocean-borne ship conveyed its Western navigator to the front doors of all civilizations on the face of the planet. The Modern Western sailing-ship was an instrument and the symbol of the West's ascendancy in the World during a Modern Age of Western history..."⁶⁸

The widespread exploration of the seas, the revolution in crafts, arts and sciences during the Renaissance period, were made possible only through these aforementioned "Medieval" inventions.

The Renaissance arose out of a world-wide interpenetration of cultures. The craft tradition that arose during the Renaissance, generally acknowledged to be the forerunner of the empirical method in modern science, owed much of its development to Chinese science. The introduction of Chinese inventions such as the magnetic compass, gunpowder, and paper making into Europe during the early Renaissance period greatly facilitated the subsequent rise of 17th century science.

⁶⁸ A. Toynbee, *An Historians Approach to Religion*, p 145

Paper making, which came via the Islamic civilisation in the form of block-printing, led to the dramatic rise in literacy which is well-known for having made the historical revolt of defying Papal authority possible - by making copies of the Bible available to everyone who could read. Moreover, the popular rejection of the authority of the ancient Greeks in secular learning, a characteristic feature of humanist philosophy during the Renaissance, was also made possible only by their writings attaining a wide degree of accessibility through the use of printing.

The Renaissance was a time of discovering New Worlds. The sense of adventure and exploration that arose from these discoveries was felt well into the 17th century. Francis Bacon, the famous 17th century populariser of modern science wrote the following about the new spirit of discovery:

"The world sailed around, the largest of the Earth's continents discovered, the compass invented, the printing press sowing knowledge, gun-powder revolutionising the art of war, ancient manuscripts rescued and the restoration of scholarship, all witness to the triumph of our New Age."⁶⁹

It was this confidence in a New Age, of new explorations and adventures that characterised the vision of the 17th century pioneers of modern science. They enthusiastically embarked upon a path of intellectual discovery with the same zeal and sense of adventure that their predecessors had set about charting the unknown seas of Africa, or set about sailing for the "New World". Yet all these advances and discoveries were made with an underlying medieval conviction of an inner moral order.

The great exploits and discoveries of the Renaissance have their roots in the spiritual renaissance of an inner vision. It was a vision that was mathematical as well as being spiritual, rational as well as moral, artistic as well as scientific. All these advances, including those made within 17th century science, carry with them an inner confidence, a balance of science and religion that took centuries to develop, in which three of the world's

⁶⁹ J. Marks, *Science and the Making of the Modern World*, p 44

major religions, working from within their own spiritual traditions came to harmonise their theology with ancient forms of wisdom and give inspiration to the rediscovery of nature. The metaphysical ground upon which the Renaissance and the modern scientific revolution stood was not only multi-cultural, but also multi-faith. Modern science grew out of the chrysalis of religious world-views.

6. Medieval Islam and Bahá'í Teachings

There are aspects of medieval Islam that correlate with and help clarify some Bahá'í teachings. The first relates to the Bahá'í belief that civilisations are founded by religion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, after describing the great cultural achievements of Islam, writes, "The purpose of these references is to establish the fact that the religions of God are the true source of the spiritual and material perfections of man, and the fountainhead for all mankind of enlightenment and beneficial knowledge"⁷⁰. The culture inspired by Islam, including its impact on the Christian West, provides one of the most clear examples in all religious history of the civilising effects of religion. This paper has attempted to illustrate how characteristics vital to the success of Islamic culture, such as its openness to all forms of learning, its inherent balance between science and religion, and religious tolerance, can be directly traced to the text of the Quran.

The second observation concerns the relationship of science and religion. From the Bahá'í perspective, the harmony of science with religion is a fundamental balance upon which individual and collective progress is made. Religion and science are likened to the two wings of a bird. Around the turn of this century in Paris, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that:

"Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone

⁷⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, p 94

he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism"⁷¹.

The importance of harmonising religious beliefs with science is clearly reflected in the success of Islam. Generally speaking, the most influential strand of thought in early medieval Christendom tended to reject science in favour of religion, and as a result, European Christian communities were characterised by a "quagmire of superstition". The impact of Islam redressed this balance. Both Islamic civilization and the European Renaissance which Islam inspired, were characterised by their harmonious integration of scientific, artistic and religious sentiments. Many of those who contributed most to cultural progress during these periods operated simultaneously as philosopher, theologian, scientist, artist, and engineer.

The need for a balance between science and religion is also an urgent concern today. But unlike the medieval period, the most influential strand of thought in modern times rejects religion in the name of science, and many of today's modern societies evoke 'Abdu'l-Bahá's image of being in a "slough of materialism". Redressing the balance today may well involve strengthening religion.

The third observation relates to the search after truth. In the Bahá'í Faith, an earnest "search after truth" is a fundamental prerequisite to establishing the harmony of science with religion and also the fundamental unity between religions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated this principle in the following way,

"When we are earnest in our search for anything, we look for it everywhere. This principle we must carry out in our search for truth. Science must be accepted. No one truth can contradict another truth. Light is good in whatsoever lamp it is burning! A rose is beautiful in whatsoever garden it may bloom! A star has the same radiance if it shines from the East or from the West. Be free from prejudice, so you will love the Sun of Truth

⁷¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p 143

from whatsoever point in the horizon it may arise! You will realize that if the Divine light of truth shone in Jesus Christ it also shone in Moses and in Buddha. The earnest seeker will arrive at this truth. This is what is meant by the 'Search after Truth' "72

It is perhaps no accident that medieval Muslim religious tolerance and cultural diversity went hand in hand with an openness to learn from ancient secular and religious traditions. The search after truth by medieval Muslims led to their appreciation and assimilation of cultures as far away as China and India, and was a decisive factor in their cultural success.

The search after truth is not the primary characteristic which is associated with religious people today. This study of Islamic civilisation suggests that for a spiritual and cultural renaissance to recur, religious people must once again become genuinely truth orientated and truth centred, so that they can rise above their theological prejudices, not just in their words, but in their deeds.

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⁷² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 137

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