



The Eternal Quest for God: Twenty Years Later. An introduction to the Portuguese edition

Since 1988, when *The Eternal Quest for God* was published in Italian, Bahá'í studies – revived by informal Bahá'í groups eager to study their Faith at an academic level in Britain since the early 1970s and in Los Angeles in the mid-1970s;¹ indirectly encouraged among the goals of the Seven Years Plan (1979-1986) in the message sent by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world on 21 March 1979;² preliminarily discussed in a statement on the encouragement of Bahá'í scholarship, sent by the International Teaching Centre to all Counselors on 9 August 1984;³ mentioned explicitly among the significant goals of the Six Years

See *A Eterna Busca por Deus: Uma Introdução à Filosofia Divina de 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Mogi Mirim, SP: Editora Bahai Do Brasil, 2008).

¹ Cf. Moojan Momen, «Scholarship on the Baha'i Faith», <<http://www.northill.demon.co.uk/relstud/schol.htm#6>>. Before the 1970s, many Bahá'ís thought that Bahá'í scholarship was a luxury and that, in light of the urgency of the endeavours for the propagation and the consolidation of the Bahá'í community, it was better to renounce it. Even such eminent scholars as Alessandro Bausani (1921-1988), who had previously published several scholarly works on the Bahá'í Faith, thought this activity premature. When, in the 1980s, Bausani changed his mind, he explained this change thus: “I remember writing . . . some time ago that I did not think that it was yet time to study the Bahá'í Faith historically and scientifically. It seemed inconceivable to me as suggesting that in the first century AD Christians should have written on the Christian religion scientifically. I felt that we, as Bahá'ís, were too close, too interested, too emphatically involved in Bahá'í history to write about it objectively. The books of Bahá'í scholarship that have been published since have convinced me of the contrary” (Alessandro Bausani, “Foreword,” in Mirza Abu'l-Faḍl Gulpaygani, *Letters and Essays, 1886-1913*, trans. and ed. Juan R.I. Cole (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1985) ix).

² Cf. *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, ed. Geoffrey W. Marks (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), p.406, ¶221.13j.

³ Cf. *Bahá'í Canada*, vol.9, no.5, July 1987. The Counselors are high-ranking administrative officers appointed for a five-year term by the Universal House of Justice with the twin functions of protection and propagation of the Bahá'í Cause. The International Teaching Centre is an appointed institution created by the Universal House of Justice in 1973, with its seat in Haifa, which

Plan (1986-1992) in a message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice on 25 February 1986;⁴ then analyzed in a compilation, entitled “Extracts from the Bahá’í Writings on the Subject of Scholarship,” sent by the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assemblies on 10 February 1995⁵ – have grown considerably and given rise to important and valuable discussions among people who engaged in Bahá’í studies and Institutions assisting them in their endeavors, foremost among the discussed issues being the question of methodology. Some Bahá’í scholars – in their partially justified admiration for Western scholarship in whose context they were professionally trained – have chosen to strictly apply the methodology used by the academic Western world to their studies of the Bahá’í Faith. The Universal House of Justice was moved to send repeated messages of guidance so that the ideas of Bahá’í scholars on this subject might become more evident.

As early as 3 January 1979, in a message addressed to a group of Bahá’í scholars, with enclosed “Comments by the Research Department at the World Centre,”⁶ the Universal House of Justice recommended that Bahá’í scholars adopt a new methodology, for whose formulation it repeatedly and patiently issued instructions and suggestions. The Universal House of Justice has remarked that modern scholarship at large needs “new scholarly methodologies capable of coming to grips with spiritual, moral, cultural, and social phenomena not hitherto encountered” and that “no segment of humanity is so well equipped as the Bahá’í community to take a leading role in this effort,” because the Bahá’ís “are being steadily freed by the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh from the ‘gravitational pull’, so to speak, of the cultures in which their habits of mind have been formed.”⁷ However, it has preferred not “to prescribe a new scientific methodology for Bahá’í academics who make study of the Faith, its teachings and history the subject of their professional

coordinates the activities of the Counselors and acts as a liason between them and the Universal House of Justice.

⁴ Cf. *Messages*, p.720, ¶453.13.

⁵ Cf. *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol.3 (Ingleside, New South Wales: Bahá’í Publications Australia), 2000, pp.226-64.

⁶ Cf. *Messages*, pp.387-92, ¶217.1-14.

⁷ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 5 October 1993, *Issues Related to the Study of the Baha’i Faith: Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1999), ¶2.5.

activities,”⁸ and has assigned the task of devising this “new scholarly paradigm called . . . to those Bahá’ís who enjoy the dual gifts of spiritual faith and intellectual faculties trained in the best that contemporary society has to offer.”⁹ Therefore, the efforts exerted by the Bahá’í scholars to establish the criteria of a new scientific methodology do not concern only the Bahá’í world but can be of interest also to modern scholarship at large.

As to the suggestions on methodology given by the Universal House of Justice, the “Comments” enclosed to its message of 3 January 1979 state that most of the problems discussed by the participants in the Bahá’í Studies Seminars held in Cambridge on 30 September and 1 October 1978 to whom that message was specially addressed arose “from an attempt by some Bahá’í scholars to make use of methodologies devised by non-Bahá’ís without thinking through the implications of such a course and without working out a methodology which would align with the spirit of the Faith.”¹⁰ The “Comments” remark that the Western world has come “to regard religion as the product of human striving after truth, as the outcome of certain climates of thought and conditions of society” and that many Westerners have gone “to the extreme of denying altogether the reality or even the possibility of a specific revelation of the Will of God to mankind through a human mouth-piece,”¹¹ suggest that the solution of the methodological problems faced by the Bahá’í scholars is their reliance on the Bahá’í principle of harmony of science and religion, faith and reason, and point out that this principle

means not only that religious teachings should be studied with the light of reason and evidence as well as of faith and inspiration, but also that everything in this creation, all aspects of human life and knowledge, should be studied in the light of revelation as well as in that of purely rational investigation. In other words, a Bahá’í scholar, when studying

⁸ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 8 February 1998, *Issues*, ¶10.7.

⁹ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 5 October 1993, *Issues*, ¶2.5.

¹⁰ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 3 January 1979, in *The Universal House of Justice, Messages*, p.388, ¶217.14.

¹¹ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 3 January 1979, in *The Universal House of Justice, Messages*, p.389, ¶217.16.

a subject, should not lock out of his mind any aspect of truth that is known to him.¹²

Through the years, this concept has been confirmed, and sufficient guidance has been given so that each Bahá'í scholar may understand that, although the Western world has developed “many scholarly methods . . . which are soundly based and of enduring validity,”¹³ the upholders of some of its modern academic methodologies insist that

all spiritual and moral phenomena must be understood through the application of a scholarly apparatus devised to explore existence in a way that ignores the issues of God's continuous relationship with His creation and His intervention in human life and history.¹⁴

Therefore, these methodologies cannot be integrally adopted by a Bahá'í since

in scientific investigation, when searching after the facts of any matter, a Bahá'í must, of course, be entirely open-minded, but in his interpretation of the facts and his evaluation of evidence . . . [it is not understood] by what logic he can ignore the truth of the Bahá'í Revelation which he has already accepted; to do so would . . . be both hypocritical and unscholarly.¹⁵

Moreover:

If one accepts the Bahá'í Teachings, one cannot, in good conscience, claim to be studying the Faith while ignoring the centrality of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant to all aspects of the religion He has established.¹⁶

It is not for the author to say whether *The Eternal Quest for God* was successful in keeping in line with the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. However, this was undoubtedly its intention.

¹² On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 3 January 1979, The Universal House of Justice, *Messages*, pp.388-9, ¶217.15.

¹³ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 8 February 1998, *Issues*, ¶10.1.

¹⁴ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 20 July 1997, *Issues*, 20 July 1997, ¶9.2.

¹⁵ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 3 January 1979, The Universal House of Justice, *Messages*, p.390, ¶217.8.

¹⁶ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 20 July 1997, *Issues*, ¶9.5.

The methodology adopted in the book

The methodology adopted in *The Eternal Quest for God* is explained in the first chapter, “The Ways of the Search.” A short comment seems appropriate after all the debates on methodology in Bahá’í scholarship and the guidance from the Universal House of Justice. The four criteria of knowledge explained by Abdu’l-Bahá, “sense perception, intellect, insight or inspiration and Holy Writings or tradition,”¹⁷ are all equally important. Any object of human investigation should be studied through all these four criteria and in the observance of certain spiritual qualities, in whose absence, no sound knowledge may be achieved. However, in the present circumstances in human civilization, and especially in the West, dominated by the ideas of dogmatic materialism, many could think that, for the Bahá’ís, the preeminent criterion is Scripture: the Book “is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed.”¹⁸ However, their impression can be easily explained.

This impression is due mainly to the contrast between the Bahá’í approach and that of the upholders of the methodologies of Western materialism. The latter ones “are convinced that it is unscientific to believe in God”¹⁹ and, as has been said, deny “altogether the reality or even the possibility of a specific revelation of the Will of God to mankind through a human mouthpiece.”²⁰ Indeed, the upholders of the methodologies of Western materialism prescind from Scripture, to which they ascribe a much lesser value than they do to their favoured authors, usually, those who faithfully follow the same dictates they follow. Therefore, the importance ascribed

¹⁷ *The Eternal Quest for God* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989), p.3. Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, trans. Laura Clifford-Barney, 3d ed. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981), pp.297-9, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace. Talks delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), pp.20-2, 253-5, *Abdul-Baha on Divine Philosophy* (Boston: The Tudor Press, 1918), pp.88-90.

¹⁸ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1992), p.56, ¶99.

¹⁹ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, to an individual believer, 26 December 1975, in “Scholarship,” *Compilation*, vol.3, p.247, ¶414.

²⁰ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 3 January 1979, in *The Universal House of Justice, Messages*, p.389, ¶217.16.

by the Bahá'ís to their Scripture as a criterion of knowledge seems preponderant over the other three criteria compared to the Western world's adverse judgment.

Bahá'í scholars are people who identify themselves with the Bahá'í Faith, carefully study its vast Scripture, and bear their Scripture in mind whatever study they are pursuing. They aim at getting a comprehensive vision of all the Bahá'í teachings, at fostering in themselves a spiritual conception of the nature of reality deeply rooted in the teachings of their Faith, at renewing their conscience, unavoidably influenced by “that pattern of standards, principles and prohibitions which is a product of ... [their] social environment,”²¹ as well as at reconsidering the best knowledge inherited from the past generations and produced by the present ones in the light of the guidance of their Scripture. However, while so doing, those scholars abide by the following statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance.²²

Therefore, on the one hand, they believe that “truth . . . cannot be found if the evidence of Revelation is systematically excluded and if discourse is limited by a basically deterministic view of the world.” On the other, their purpose is “the ascertainment of truth,” and they know that they are bound to “observe the highest standards of honesty, integrity and truthfulness.”²³

A practical example of the implementation of this principle is the policy recently adopted in the restoration work of the Prison of Bahá'u'lláh in ‘Akká, realized by the Israeli authorities. Preliminary scientific search in preparation for the restoration of the site proved that the prevalent understanding of the Bahá'ís that Bahá'u'lláh was confined in a jail cell, with bars at the windows, was inaccurate and that He had been in reality, lodged in the quarters of someone of high standing, probably a military commander. In their decision about the course of the works, the Bahá'í representatives chose to follow the scientific evidence, even if some among

²¹ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 8 February 1998, *Issues*, ¶10.11.

²² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks. Addresses Given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1911* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), ¶44.18.

²³ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 8 February 1998, *Issues*, ¶10.1.

the Bahá'ís, accustomed to another idea of that Prison, could be disoriented by the new aspect of the Prison. Albert Lincoln, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community, who represented the Bahá'ís in the restoration process, said: “The important lesson here may be that scholarship will always unearth new facts and new perspectives . . . This process of calling into question what we thought we knew reflects one aspect of the harmony of science and religion, which is a basic principle of the Bahá'í Faith’.” Then he added on a personal note: “I went back and read in a completely different way what Bahá'u'lláh said about His suffering’.” Although ‘Akká was a desolate and unhealthy place, the sufferings of Bahá'u'lláh were predominantly moral and were caused by His awareness of the woes the future world would have gone through because of its refusal of His message.²⁴

In conclusion, for the Bahá'ís, the Book “is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed,”²⁵ however, they are also expected not to accept any human interpretation of that Book unquestioningly and to bend their utmost endeavour so that they may acquire a deeper understanding of Scripture, according to their capacities, through the use of all the available criteria of knowledge. They know that, if they adopt this method, they will achieve not only fruits of knowledge but also steady personal progress because their criteria of knowledge will become more and more refined, drawing them away from self-centred, and thus limited perspectives, and orienting them towards broader and broader, unitary, perceptions, more suitable to the modern world, with its pressing need of unity.

The contents of the book

The Eternal Quest for God collects, in a systematic way, some Bahá'í teachings on essential subjects, about which every human being should get her idea so that she may conceive an overall vision of life on whose ground she will take her practical decisions while trying to effectively accomplish her twofold purpose on earth, within the limits of her opportunities and capacities: on the one hand, developing her spiritual potentialities, on the other using those developing capacities to serve

²⁴ *One Country. Newsletter of the Bahá'í International Community*, vol.16, no.3 (October-December 2004), p.7.

²⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p.56, ¶99.

the progress of human civilization. These teachings, comprising “the issues of God’s continuous relationship with His creation” and “His intervention in human life and history,”²⁶ fall within Bahá’í theology, which the Wilmette Institute, an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, operating “as a centre of learning, offering academic, professional, and service-oriented programs related to the Bahá’í Faith,” describes, in its presentation of a course entitled “Introduction to Bahá’í Theology,” held between 1 November 2000 and 31 January 2001, with the following words:

Bahá’í Theology is neither highly abstract, nor excessively difficult, nor a narrow and specialized study. Rather, it consists of many of the most basic and central teachings of the Bahá’í Faith: its concept of the nature of God; how that God guides humanity through revelation vouchsafed unto Manifestations; the nature and purpose of the Manifestations and their successive teachings (progressive revelation and the Covenant); the nature and purpose of human beings and their physical existence; the nature of physical creation; and the nature of the next world. In short, Bahá’í Theology answers the basic questions human beings have always asked about the nature and purpose of life.²⁷

These are the subjects discussed in *The Eternal Quest for God*,²⁸ which has been defined a “useful volume dedicated to Bahá’í theology” and a “work that sets the Bahá’í concept of the nature of humanity in the context of the Bahá’í concepts of

²⁶ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 20 July 1997, *Issues*, ¶9.2.

²⁷ See <http://wilmetteinstitute.org/theology2.html>.

²⁸ It will be observed that sacred cosmology, that occupies a central position the theologies of other religions, is not mentioned in this statement. *The Eternal Quest for God* indirectly refers to this issue in chapters two and ten. However, on the ground of the Bahá’í belief that the spiritual worlds are unknowable, discusses them in a metaphorical perspective, according to what Bahá’u’lláh teaches. He says for example: “Didst thou behold immortal sovereignty, thou wouldst strive to pass from this fleeting world. But to conceal the one from thee and to reveal the other is a mystery which none but the pure in heart can comprehend” (Bahá’u’lláh, *The Hidden Words by Bahá’u’lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi [reprint, Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1975], from the Persian, no.41, p.36).

God, Manifestation, and physical creation,”²⁹ and used as a text of theology in some Bahá’í schools, such as the above mentioned Wilmette Institute and Landegg International University, active in Wienacht, Switzerland, from 1991 to 2004.

The discussion of these subjects is undoubtedly incomplete, both because the Bahá’í Texts available in English are quite few when compared to the whole body of Bahá’í Scripture and because these Texts have been analyzed by a mind that, being limited and not yet sufficiently imbued with the Bahá’í teachings, has undoubtedly missed something even of what is available in English. *The Eternal Quest for God* is just a starting point. Present and future generations will hopefully transform it into many long and deep treatises on each of the subjects, only briefly discussed in this book, in the light of the translated Texts and of others that will become available in the meantime, in the light of the constant discoveries of science, and in the light of the unfailing guidance of the Universal House of Justice. The Bahá’í world has already produced several publications on these subjects, the most complete among them being, according to Robert H. Stockman, director of Wilmette Institute, and Jonah Winters, Website developer, webmaster of the Bahá’í Library website and executive editor of the Bahá’í Academics Resource Library, *Revisioning the Sacred*, edited by Jack McLean.³⁰

Several Bahá’ís still wonder whether, in the Bahá’í world, there is room for theology and theologians, considering that in the past, “theology succeeded in constructing in the heart of each one of the great faiths an authority parallel with, and even inimical in spirit to, the revealed teachings on which the tradition was based.”³¹ However, the Universal House of Justice has written to an Association for Bahá’í Studies:

Your aim should be to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance within which will be included scholars whose principal interest is in theological issues as well as those scholars whose interests

²⁹ Robert H. Stockman and Jonah Winters, *A Resource Guide for the Scholarly Study of the Bahá’í Faith* (Research Office, National Bahá’í Center, Wilmette, Illinois, 1997), section II, ¶66, 34, at <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~Bahai/rg/rg.toc.html>.

³⁰ Jack McLean (ed.), *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá’í Theology: Studies in the Bábí and Bahá’í Religions*, (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1997).

³¹ Commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 2005), ¶37.

lie in relating the insights provided by the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary thought in the arts and sciences.³²

Whoever studies theology must only consider the scriptural theological teachings and the implications of the Bahá'í Covenant. Theology will thus take on more inviting and reassuring connotations than in the past. The author hopes that he may contribute to achieving this result.

The overall theological thought of the author

The overall theological thought of the author seems evident in the approach adopted in the book: there is no need for scholars to conceive *ex novo* a Bahá'í theology as it happened in the past. Bahá'í theology is in Bahá'í Scripture, which expounds at length on its central issues. The incipient maturity of humankind has enabled the Manifestation of God to clearly explain many issues that in the past had been objects of mere allusions in the Scripture. Therefore, in the past, those interested in those issues were obliged to meditate, reflect, and finally conceive manmade theologies that were inspiring but also burdened with all the weight of human fallibility and thus conducive to conflicts and divisions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has also discussed these issues in His Writings and discourses, formulating a "divine philosophy" that, according to the author, represents the essence of Bahá'í theology. Shoghi Effendi has clarified several central issues of Bahá'í theology, especially in a letter addressed to all the Bahá'ís on 8 February 1934, known as "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh," which is "almost totally devoted to a consideration of fundamental theological and philosophical issues"³³ and which is sometimes considered as the first work on "systematic theology."³⁴ Finally Bahá'u'lláh

has done away with the unyielding and dictatorial views of the learned and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most

³² On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 19 October 1993, *Issues*, ¶4.8.

³³ William S. Hatcher, "An Analysis of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*," in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi: Proceedings of the Association for Baha'i Studies Ninth Annual Conference November 2-4, 1984 Ottawa, Canada* (Ottawa: Association for Baha'i Studies, 1993), p.74.

³⁴ Stockman and Winters, *A Resource Guide*, section II, ¶66.

accomplished and learned among men, and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centres and specified assemblies.³⁵

When properly understood, this simple and straightforward provision shelters each Bahá'í from personal authoritarian temptations and the body of the believers from contentions, divisions and schisms.

In full awareness of and compliance with these ideas, *The Eternal Quest for God* aims to collect several important scriptural passages available in English on theological issues and offer them to any interested reader. The author did his best not to express personal ideas, not only because he feared lest he might adulterate the meanings of the quoted passages but also because, as the Universal House of Justice remarks,

In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God's Revelation were overanxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was beyond their power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would make comprehensible, to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary. Such compromises with essential truth, such intellectual pride, we must scrupulously avoid.³⁶

Therefore, the observation of William S. Hatcher (1935-2005), one of the eight Platonist philosophers listed in the *Enciclopédie Philosophique Universelle*, published by Presses Universitaires de France, in his review of the book – that “more often than not, the author makes only minimal inferences from the quoted texts and leaves the reader the task of deducing their deeper implications. So much is the case that certain portions of the work are barely more than a series of highly relevant quotations from Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í sources, surgically spliced to form a seamless whole”³⁷ – has been highly appreciated. Equally appreciated was the comment expressed many years ago by an almost unknown reader: “This is not a book, it is a compilation of Writings.” Reminding Shoghi Effendi's words that “one

³⁵ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 14 March 1927, to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Istanbul, in 14 March 1996, *Issues*, ¶6.4.

³⁶ The Universal House of Justice, to an individual believer, 27 May 1966, *Messages*, p.87, ¶35.11.

³⁷ *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol.5:2 (1992), pp.87-8.

might liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them,"³⁸ the author has tried to point out some "points pole apart" and left the readers free to formulate their thoughts and doctrines. All the quotations are thoroughly accompanied by their bibliographic references. Therefore, the reader will be able to identify by himself the level of authoritativeness of each of them, depending on whether they are revealed or reported words by Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb; Writings or discourses by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and in the latter case, whether they are authenticated utterances, as *Some Answered Questions*, or utterances whose notes in both Persian and English have been recorded, or utterances whose notes exist only in either Persian or English; writings of Shoghi Effendi or letters written on his behalf; and finally writings of the Universal House of Justice or letters written on its behalf or writings commissioned by it.³⁹

The author also tried to be sparing in expressing his opinions, lest he might raise conflicts or give the unwanted impression of considering himself authoritative, especially out of sheer respect for Scripture, a unique gift of God for our guidance. He also relied on the fact that his readers may increasingly want to, on the one hand, filter the opinions of others through their explorative procedure and, on the other, be tolerant and give for granted the good faith of writers, obviously until proved to the contrary.

When this book was written, although the Universal House of Justice's protection for possible doctrinal errors was clearly described in the Writings, this issue had not yet been so openly discussed among scholars. Those discussions moved the Universal House of Justice to focus the attention of the Bahá'ís on some passages written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and of letters written by the Universal House of Justice itself, for example, that of 9 March 1965, especially 20-

³⁸ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to an individual believer, 5 July 1947, in *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol.1 ([Ingleside, New South Wales]: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), vol.1, p.228, ¶506.

³⁹ The different degrees of the authoritativeness of the quotations have also been visually emphasized through the adoption of the criterion followed by Shoghi Effendi, that is, all the words written by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá were italicised, whereas their reported words were romanised. The English edition of this book mistakingly romanises 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions*, which Shoghi Effendi italicises. The Portuguese edition has corrected this flaw.

3.⁴⁰ These letters clarified that the Universal House of Justice is expected to “deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book”⁴¹ and thus has the power of “elucidating obscure matters.”⁴² Therefore, the fears that have for some time withheld the author from publishing this book, that is, his fear lest he might contaminate the understanding of others through his words, have been dissipated: obscure matters will be elucidated by the Universal House of Justice that, through its writings, or writings on its behalf or commissioned by it, will guide the Bahá’ís towards a more profound understanding of the central and secondary themes of the Faith, comprising theological issues, and will prevent Bahá’í theology from becoming a reason of conflicts and divisions, as it happened in the past.

Further explanations of the author’s thoughts about Bahá’í theology are given in a special paper to which any interested reader is referred. In brief, that paper states that Bahá’í theology “is not a mere intellectual knowledge of abstract ideas, but a conscious knowledge of spiritual reality, which every Baha’i is invited to achieve, so that his life may be renewed.” The acquisition of this knowledge implies “three fruits . . . inner knowledge, spiritual progress, and an enhanced capacity of loving. These fruits are vital means for the attainment of the object of the Baha’i Faith: the oneness of humankind.”⁴³ Indeed, the author believes that deepening the major theological issues through perusing the Writings, reflection, and meditation is fundamental to each person’s spiritual life. Moreover, He especially believes that only a constant effort to arise towards the broader and broader horizons disclosed by this study to the eyes of its lovers both justifies and assists this endeavour. Otherwise, theology is only a useless excursion through the barren lands of metaphysical hair-splittings.

⁴⁰ Cf. The Universal House of Justice, to an individual believer, 27 May 1966, *Messages*, p.56-7, ¶23.20-23.23.

⁴¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971), p.20.

⁴² On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 2 July 1996, *Issues*, ¶7.8.

⁴³ Julio Savi, «Towards a definition of Baha’i theology and mystical philosophy», *Baha’i Studies Review*, vol.11 (2003), pp.58-70.

The main reasons why this book was written

The Eternal Quest for God is the fruit of a prolonged and impassioned personal study pursued because of a need for clarity of ideas on those issues. For several years, the author has collected and organized quotations from the Bahá'í Writings and secondary literature on themes of his interest so that he might review them in their original context and thus better understand them. Later, he accompanied them with quotations by some thinkers that he considered relevant. While so doing, the author met the following call by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

We must also render service to the world of intellectuality in order that the minds of men may increase in power and become keener in perception, assisting the intellect of man to attain its supremacy so that the ideal virtues may appear. Before a step is taken in this direction [1] we must be able to prove Divinity from the standpoint of reason so that no doubt or objection may remain for the rationalist. Afterward, [2] we must be able to prove the existence of the bounty of God – that the divine bounty encompasses humanity and that it is transcendental. Furthermore, [3] we must demonstrate that the spirit of man is immortal, that it is not subject to disintegration and that it comprises the virtues of humanity.⁴⁴

At this point, he thought that his collected material could be offered to the others as a study text, opened to revision, not as the presentation of personal ideas, for the value they may have, a text to which other quotations could be added, or perhaps from which some quotations could be detracted because they are considered off the subject or inappropriate.

Therefore, *The Eternal Quest for God* is intended as an encouragement to deepen the theological subjects explained in the Bahá'í Writings. In the author's opinion, this deepening is indispensable not only for the personal spiritual growth of the individual but also for the collective growth of human civilization. Bahá'í theology, he feels, will develop through the interaction of three fundamental elements. The first element is its scriptural foundation. The second is the studies

⁴⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.325-6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá then adds: "This is, in reality, the science of Divinity" (*Promulgation*, p.326 [numbers added]).

accomplished by the Bahá'ís of their Scripture while pursuing three basic goals: first, a deeper and deeper understanding of the Texts; second, a broader and broader divulgation of their scriptural teachings, requiring in its turn, on the one hand, their collation with the best literature produced in this field by human civilization and, on the other, their careful “translation” into a “modern” language, to meet the needs of particular categories of readers; third, efforts to understand how the scriptural teachings may contribute to the practical solution of contemporary problems and thus to the promotion of the collective wellbeing of humankind. The third element is the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, which warrants the unity of these efforts, orienting them towards the implementation of an organic plan for the spiritualization of the world and the construction of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, elucidating obscure matters and solving controversies that, God forbid, may arise among the believers.

However, this book was not written only for the Bahá'ís. Instead, it was meant for all people who, Bahá'ís or not-Bahá'ís, are interested in the issues of spirituality. It offers a preliminary discussion of themes that are very important for all people of faith, themes that reflect not much the “temporal” aspects of religion, as its “perennial” aspect, with the intention – perhaps too ambitious – to point out through the words of the Bahá'í Writings the fundamental elements of a spiritual conception of the nature of reality that may bring together the followers of all faiths, beyond their specific visions, which have been up to now viewed as conflicting with, contradicting and denying one another. One of the dreams the author hopes to see realized in the earthly stage of his existence is “unity in religion.”⁴⁵ He does not intend this unity to unify all humans in a single denominational faith. This unification, in his opinion, will be realized only in that remote future that the Bahá'í Writings call the Golden Age of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh.⁴⁶ He intends “unity in religion” as a preliminary, unitary spiritual vision in the diversity of the ancient religious traditions, a vision that will gradually remove “the causes of

⁴⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings*, comp. Research Department of The Universal House of Justice, trans. a Committee at the Bahá'í World Centre and Marzieh Gail (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p.32, ¶15.

⁴⁶ Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), p.65.

religious strife.”⁴⁷ A widespread understanding of the threefold oneness proclaimed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His first public speech in the West, on 10 September 1911 in London – “There is one God; mankind is one; the foundations of religion are one”⁴⁸ – is for this writer a sweet dream for the atmosphere of enthusiasm, sharing, unity that this understanding may create, without even slightly impairing the ancient loyalties to which many individuals are still strictly and sincerely bound. This atmosphere already characterizes some of the interfaith meetings held in increasing numbers throughout the world. From this atmosphere, one may perceive the importance of the fruits that a wider diffusion of these concepts will yield. It is not for the author to say whether this book may assist this unification, but the aspiration to this achievement is certainly part of its same structure. The recent documents by the Universal House of Justice, *To the World’s Religious Leaders* (2002) and *One Common Faith* (2005), especially their call to read the ancient teaching “through the eyes of Bahá’u’lláh,”⁴⁹ seems to imply that this aspiration does not go against the Bahá’í teachings and the ideas of the Centre of the Covenant, as expressed in its directives.

Last but not least, *The Eternal Quest for God* is a call to search after God, after His knowledge, after His love, because without these blessings, human beings remain even smaller than what they are even when their gazes are turned towards the Infinite. The pursuit of this knowledge and this love seems to be a part of the essence of all the Faiths of the world. It also is an element that brings together all those who are attracted towards the Transcendent, even if they do not fully or partially identify themselves with an institutional religion. In this respect, this book would like to offset the materialistic conception of the nature of reality, which is so diffused in the Western world that it looks like a new dogmatic religion. *The Eternal Quest for God* is thus addressed to all Westerners, with the ambition of reminding them of the noblest spiritual matrixes of their noble civilization, whose foundations are, in the author’s opinion, of a spiritual character. The author is inclined to accept the hypothesis upheld by Muslim historians and confirmed by Bahá’u’lláh, that “the sages aforetime acquired their knowledge from the Prophets,

⁴⁷ Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh. Selected Letters by Shoghi Effendi* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1955), p.204.

⁴⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London, reprint, (London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p.20.

⁴⁹ Commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, ¶39.

inasmuch as the latter were the Exponents of divine philosophy and the Revealers of heavenly mysteries,”⁵⁰ and in particular that the Hellenic philosophy – the cultural matrix of the West – was inspired by the wisdom of Judaism. Therefore, the spiritual conception of the nature of reality presented in *The Eternal Quest for God* is in line with the best aspects of Western tradition. The author has been encouraged by the fact that Hatcher has appreciated that which he calls “many knowledgeable and useful references to the contributions of the major philosophers of history but always bringing to bear on each issue discussed a number of highly pertinent quotations from Bahá’í sources.”⁵¹

The Eternal Quest for God, however, also addresses those many people who, from outside the West, believe “not only that human nature is deeply influenced by spiritual forces, but that its very identity is spiritual,” but were once more marginalized by the West, whose “dogmatic materialism . . . ensured that no competing voices would retain the ability to challenge projects of world wide economic exploitation.”⁵² It proves that also in the West there are voices, albeit they are a minority, that do not dissent from theirs, and encourage them to persist in their attachment to the Transcendent, inviting them to try to discover “the unity of purpose and principle running throughout” the Scriptures of all the world’s religions: first, “the progressive articulation and emphatic assertion of the oneness of God, Creator of all existence whether of the phenomenal world or of those realms that transcend it,” second, the concept that “the soul’s ability to attain to an understanding of its Creator’s purpose is the product not merely of its own effort, but of interventions of the Divine that open the way,” third, the idea that “the succession of revelations of the Divine also appears as an implicit – and usually explicit – feature of all the major faiths,” and, last but not least, the “recognition of the essential oneness of religion” and of the fact that “Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad – or of the succession of Avatars who inspired the Hindu scriptures” did not found “distinct religions,” but have been “the spiritual Educators of history . . . the animating forces in the rise of the civilizations through which consciousness has flowered.”⁵³ This book is thus an

⁵⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978), pp.144-5.

⁵¹ *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, vol.5:2 (1992), pp.87-8.

⁵² Commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, ¶4.

⁵³ Commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, ¶39, 41, 42, 43, 44.

encouragement to build in this direction bridges that may lead all humans to a road through which they may arrive at the point of building together a new world of justice and peace, blessed by the wealth of unity in diversity: “unity in the political realm . . . unity of thought in world undertakings . . . unity in freedom . . . unity in religion . . . unity of nations . . . unity of races . . . unity of language,”⁵⁴ in the inspiring diversity of the diverse “ethnic geniuses” of our varied world.



Although, in the meantime, scholarship on Bahá’í theology has steadily gone forward, the author thinks that *The Eternal Quest for God* could still be written in the same way as it was almost twenty years ago. Therefore, he is grateful that, after its publication in Spanish by the Editorial Bahá’í in 1999 with the title *La eterna búsqueda del conocimiento* [The Eternal Quest for Knowledge], the Editora Bahá’í do Brasil has decided to offer it in 2006, to the Lusophone World as well, more than 200 million people, mainly distributed in Europe, South America, Africa and Asia. Portuguese, the language spoken by all those people, is the fifth most spoken language in the world, the language of the Portuguese Luís de Camões (1525-1580), Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), José Saramago (1922) and the Brazilian Jorge Amado de Faria (1912-2001), Marcos Rey (1925-1999) and Rubem Fonseca (1925) . . . the language of fado and choro. To the people of this lusophone world, the author – of Italian mother language, and thus belonging to the same Neo-Latin matrix as they do – gives his wishes that each of them may contribute, as far as her opportunities and capacities enable her, to hand down the best heritage of those precious cultures, already unified by the same ancient Lusitan idiom, to the new global civilization slowly and laboriously arising in that one diversified “country” that is the world, whose “citizens” all of us are: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.”⁵⁵

Julio Savi

Bologna, 19 January 2006

⁵⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections*, p.32, ¶15.

⁵⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets*, p.167.