Religion and Exclusivism: a Bahá'í Perspective[1]

The term 'exclusivism' has been adopted in interfaith dialogue to denote the attitude of those who maintain that only their religion is true and that the others are false. In the past, almost all organized religions were mostly exclusivist, and even today, several people maintain that exclusivism is an intrinsic feature of religion. However, many factors have created doubts about exclusivism's rational and moral legitimacy. From a Bahá'í perspective, exclusivist ideas "today raise walls of separation and conflict in an age when the earth has literally become one homeland and human beings must learn to see themselves as its citizens." (OCF 29) We offer a preliminary examination of the Bahá'í teachings bearing on exclusivism, according to our understanding of the open letter addressed by the Universal House of Justice "To the World's Religious Leaders," and of the commentary of this letter commissioned by the Universal House of Justice itself published as a booklet entitled *One Common Faith*.

Oneness of religion: a pivot of the Bahá'í Faith

Despite those who maintain that exclusivism is an intrinsic feature of religion, Bahá'í Scriptures convey the opposite. Shoghi Effendi summarizes the Bahá'í attitude towards other religions as follows:

> . . . religious truth is not absolute but relative . . . Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process ...all the great religions of the world are divine in origin . . . their basic principles are in complete harmony . . . their aims and purposes are one and the same . . . their teachings are but facets of one truth . . . their functions are complementary . . . they differ only in the non-essential as-

[1] *Lights of 'Irfán*, vol. 7 (2006), pp. 221-38 (revised). I thank Prof. Rhett Diessner, Mrs. Lucia Ricco and Mr. Peter Terry for their suggestions. The ideas expressed in this paper result from a personal study and are not intended as either a final word or an official Bahá'í position on the issue.

> pects of their doctrines and . . . their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society. (OCF 6)

This statement recapitulates the essential components of the Bahá'í conception of the oneness of religions. Before examining each of them, we will suggest a provisional definition of religion in light of the Bahá'í teachings. Religion is the body of "*the teachings of the Lord God*" (SWAB 52) revealed to humankind through a "Perfect Man," whom Bahá'í Scriptures call a Manifestation of God, because as a "*clear and polished mirror*" he manifests the "*Essence of Divinity*" (SAQ 114). Those teachings, mainly expounded in a body of Scripture, are old and new. They are old because they are connected with other messages previously sent by God. They are new because they signal the beginning of a new age in the Divine Revelation. On the one hand, they describe "*the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things*" (SAQ 158). Therefore, they are "*the essence and the fundamentals of philosophy*" (TB 145) and "*in conformity with science and reason*" (SAQ 299). On the other, they are "*a reflection of . . . [God's] Will*" (GWB 338), whose "*fundamental basis is love*" (TAB 3:729-30), and therefore they are "*the channel of love unto all peoples*" (SWAB 36). At the personal level, those teachings can guide whoever puts into practice them to the acquisition and praxis of the divine virtues, especially that of love with its consequences of unity, fellowship and peace among human beings. Therefore, they lead any sincere believer to the highest possible level of spirituality[2] during that period of human collective development. At the collective level, they are "*the cause of oneness among men, and the means of unity and love*" (SWAB 28). Therefore, they are "*the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world and of tranquility amongst its peoples*" (TB 63-4). *One Common Faith* synthetically states that religion is "*the principal force impelling the development of consciousness*" (OCF 23), "*discerns and articulates*

[2] Spirituality may be defined, in the light of the Bahá'í teachings, as the gradual acquisition of the required capacities to fulfill the twofold purpose of one's life, that is, inwardly, knowing and worshipping God (cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 314, no. CLXXXI), intended as following—out of one's love of God—the precepts of one's religion, whose divine origin one has recognized, and, outwardly, playing one's part "*to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 215). This concept may be offered as a Bahá'í equivalent of the Christian concept of salvation.

the values unfolding progressively through Divine revelation . . . [and] defines goals that serve the evolutionary process" (OCF 33).

This definition underlines three basic elements of religion: a foundational Figure, characterized by a special relation with the Divine; his teachings, which creatively generate spirituality in human beings, with its consequences of unity and peace among human beings; and Scripture, that is, one or more Books containing those teachings. It is offered only as a possible description, in the light of the Bahá'í teachings, of "all the great religions of the world" (OCF 6), giving to the word "great" not certainly worldly connotations of numerical strength, geographical diffusion or earthly power, but a connotation of spiritual greatness worthy of a teaching capable of leading human beings to spirituality. According to the Bahá'í teachings, these religions are "Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the religion of the Sabeans," as well as the Bahá'í and the Bábí religions.[3] The foundational Figures of these religions may be best described, in the words of One Common Faith, "as the spiritual Educators of history, as the animating forces in the rise of the civilizations through which consciousness has flowered" (OCF 34).

I. " Religious truth is not absolute but relative"

This proposition does not imply that the Manifestations of God are not endowed with "omniscience," but that they reveal to humankind only that part of their knowledge that humankind can understand in that stage of its evolution on earth. It can be put into perspective in the light of two fundamental Bahá'í conceptions. The first is that conception whereby "*[w]hatsoever in the contingent world can either be expressed or apprehended, can never transgress the limits which, by its inherent nature, have been imposed upon it*" (SLH 35). The second is Bahá'u'lláh's principle of "*the continuity of Divine Revelation*" (GWB 151) and "*the progressiveness of religious experience*" (PDC 108), which will be now explained.

II. "Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process"

This concept is known among the Bahá'ís as "progressive Revelation" (GWB 75). Bahá'í Scriptures mention a pre-eternal Covenant between God and human-

[3] Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 28 July 1936.

kind, God Himself established out of His bounty. This Covenant provides that God pledges to look after the spiritual development of human beings and that human beings pledge to do His will on earth. Therefore, God periodically reveals His will through His Manifestations. They reveal to humankind "an ever-increasing measure of His truth, of His inscrutable will and Divine guidance" (WOB 118), according to ever-evolving human capacities of understanding and accomplishment. Human beings are required to make good use of their "*understanding*," which has been given to them so that they may "*discern the truth in all things*," be lead "*to that which is right*," and "*discover the secrets of creation*" (GWB 194). They will thus be enabled to recognize the divine station of the Manifestations of God, understand and accept their divine verities, abide by their divine guidance, and accomplish the divine will as they manifest it. Thus, they obtain personal and collective spirituality.

The concept of progressive revelation explains the multiplicity of religions and their teachings. It contradicts the claims of "uniqueness" or "finality" of other religions. However, it does not "dwarf the admitted magnitude of their colossal achievements," nor "detract one jot or one tittle from the influence they exert or the loyalty they inspire." On the contrary, it contributes to "widen their basis . . . [and] to reconcile their aims" (WOB 114), in the awareness that their followers abide by the teachings of historically different Personages, who are, however, all united to one another in their shared mission as "*Educator[s] of mankind*" (KI 58). The concept of progressive revelation also implies that the content of the verities revealed by each Manifestation depends on the maturity which humankind has attained through the education it received from all past Manifestations and because of passing time, and not on any intrinsic superiority of any one among the Manifestations over the other. Therefore, this concept implies that no religion has "a superior merit" (WOB 60) than the others because its features only depend on the receptivity of the age in which it was revealed. *One Common Faith* warns: "To presume to judge among the Messengers of God, exalting one above the other, would be to give in to the delusion that the Eternal and All-Embracing is subject to the vagaries of human preference" (OCF 20).

III. "All the great religions of the world are divine in origin"

This concept could be wrongly interpreted as a forerunner of pluralism, as formulated by John H. Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and others. On the contrary, paraphrasing Hick's definition of pluralism, this proposition states that the great religious traditions of the world represent different human perceptions of and responses to the revelation sent, in different forms in different historical ages, by the same infinite divine Reality. And thus, the two propositions are virtual opposites: pluralist philosophers, who adopt the humanistic point of view, stress the different human responses to "the same infinite divine Reality." Bahá'í Scriptures, with their spiritual conception of the nature of reality, also stress the different forms of the various revelations sent by "the same infinite divine Reality."

The Universal House of Justice remarks in its message "To the World's Religious Leaders" that the concept that "the truth underlying all religions is in its essence one" is accepted in the world by many people "as an intuitive awareness born from the ever widening experience of others and from a dawning acceptance of the oneness of the human family itself," and augurs that "this diffuse and still tentative perception" may "consolidate itself and contribute effectively to the building of a peaceful world" through "the wholehearted confirmation of those to whom, even at this late hour, masses of the earth's population look for guidance" (4). *One Common Faith* points out the responsibility of the Bahá'ís of bringing the "recognition of this reality" to "operate at the heart of religious discourse" (OCF ii) and thus the importance of reflecting on this issue. The Bahá'í teachings offer several reflections from which one may deduce that all the "great" religions are divine in origin. The most important are: their capacity for creating spirituality in their sincere followers; their capacity for creating civilization; their capacity for becoming established in the world notwithstanding the initial opposition that most of them must face; their capacity, once established, for surviving and enduring far into the future; and the universality of their basic principles. Some modern thinkers share the first two reflections. For example, Hick writes that all "the great traditions . . . seem to be more or less equally productive of the outstanding individuals whom we call saints" (7). And Arnold J. Toynbee writes that the "higher religions" are "the chrysalis from which a new civilization eventually emerges" (13). As to the capacity of becoming established and enduring far into the future, it has been anticipated by Jesus, who said: "Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not

planted, shall be rooted up" (Matthew 15:13). As to the universality of their basic principles, this concept will be now explained.

IV. " Their basic principles are in complete harmony"

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the reasons for this proposition. Given that the Founders of the "great" religions are Manifestations of God and that God is "the Truth" (TB 3:704), then "*whatever emanates from Them is identical with the truth, and conformable to reality*" (SAQ 173). Since "*reality is one and cannot admit of multiplicity*" (SWAB 298), we may conclude that the "*foundations of the Religion of God . . . are irremovable and eternal*" (SAQ 48). 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions some "*all-universal and all-inclusive*" "*principles*" (SWAB 69), which He defines as the "*foundations of the Religion of God*" (SAQ 48). These principles may be listed under at least five different categories.[4]

1. Knowledge

Religions teach a particular kind of "knowledge (*'irfán*),"[5] which is an experiential mystical knowledge. This knowledge comprises "*the knowledge (*ma'rifat*) of God*" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Mufávaḍát* 209, SAQ 300), "*the knowledge (*ma'rifat*) of the Manifestations of God*" (*Mufávaḍát* 106, SAQ 222), and the discovery of "inner truths and mysteries" (SWAB 271). Bahá'u'lláh states that God is unknowable and that to know God, which is the purpose of human life (GWB 70), means "*to recognize (*ma'rifat*) His Manifestation.*" (KI 145) As to the meaning of this "knowledge" or "recognition" of the Manifestation of God, it is also intended as the experiential knowledge of one's potential divine qualities and of "*inner truths and mysteries*" (SWAB 271) attained through one's obedience to the divine will, as revealed by His Manifestation, because of one's love for Him (cf. KI 100-2). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the teachings revealed by the Manifestations of God "*are the reflex [reflections] on this plane of the divine laws, and they become the medium for transmuting the*

[4] Since religious teachings are so complex and various, our list is undoubtedly incomplete (cf. letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 10 July 1939). I am grateful to Mr. Peter Terry for his suggestion of this arrangement of religious teachings into categories.

[5] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Mufávaḍát* 36, English translation: *Some Answered Questions* 47.Whenever this kind of knowledge is intended, Bahá'í Scriptures use the Arabic and Persian words *'irfán* and *ma'rifat*, denoting the experiential knowledge typical of mystical experience.

thought of man into his reality" ('Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ and Christianity, 10). And thus. we come to another fundamental principle of religion.

2. Spiritual awakening

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "*the knowledge of God*" (SAQ 300) and the discovery of "*inner truths and mysteries*" (SWAB 271)—attained through one's obedience to the will of God, as revealed by His Manifestation, because of one's love for Him—awaken, through "*the breaths of the Holy Spirit*" (SWAB 10), the "*spiritual perfections*" (SAQ 194) of human beings, and their "*intuitive knowledge*" (SAQ 157). This spiritual awakening brings about their "*second birth*" (TDP 95), or detachment "*from the world of nature*" (SWAB 304), that is, "*spirituality*" (SAQ 235) or "*spiritual progress*" (SAQ 300), which implies the acquisition of "the virtues and perfections which adorn the reality of man" (SAQ223).

3. Love and oneness, faith and certitude

These qualities stand out among the virtues humans acquire through their spiritual awakening. Love becomes manifest as the "*love of God*" (SAQ 47) and the "*love of all mankind*" (TB 138). Its highest expression is "*universal love*" (SWAB 20), typical of those who have recognized the oneness of humankind. As to oneness, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* several "*collective centers,*" conducive to "*association and unity between the children of men*" (TDP 93). He lists as first "*patriotism ... nationalism ...identity of interests ...political alliance ...the union of ideals ...the cultural and intellectual collective center*" (93). Although they may produce "*prosperity of the world of humanity,*" they are "*temporary and not everlasting*" (93). The greatest "*collective center*" is that "*of the sacred religions*" (97), that is, "*the body of the divine teachings, which include all the degrees and embrace all the universal relations and necessary laws of humanity*" (94). This "*Divine Collective Center*" (97), which is "*eternal,*" "*overcomes and includes all the other collective centers*" (93) because, through "*the celestial potency of the Word of God*" (95), it "*organizes the oneness of the world of humanity, and destroys the foundation of differences*" (93). In one of His talks, dealing with "the subject of unity," 'Abdu'l-Bahá also described two higher "*expressions of unity*" mentioned in the Bahá'í Scriptures: "*the oneness of the Manifestations of God*" and "*the divine unity or entity*" (PUP 192). As to the former, Bahá'u'lláh writes that the

Manifestations of God "*are all sent down from the heaven of the Will of God,*" and therefore, they "*are regarded as one soul and the same person*" (KI 152). As to the latter, He writes that its "*true meaning*" is not to "*be tempted to make any distinction between any of the Manifestations of His Cause*" (GWB 59). The understanding of these "*expressions of unity*" is an important component of "*unity in religion,*" which 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes as "*the corner-stone of the foundation*" of "*the unity of all mankind*" (SWAB 32). As to faith and certitude, faith is intended as "*the love that flows from man to God*" (PT 58.5), "*conscious knowledge, and . . . the practice of good deeds*" (TAB 3:549); and certitude is the capacity "*to remain steadfast*" (GWB 338) in one's faith.

4. Moral development

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that spiritual awakening and the acquisition of "*the virtues and perfections which adorn the reality of man*" (SAQ 223) are both caused by and result in "*the expansion of consciousness*" (SWAB 126). This expansion promotes "*the ethical development and spiritual progress of mankind*" (PUP 97) through the development of "the moral relations between the hearts" (Christ 11).

5. The progress of humankind

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes "*material*" (SWAB 285) and "*spiritual progress*" (SAQ 300). The former "*promoteth the principles of material achievement*" (SWAB 283), and its "*propagator and executive power*" is a "*just government*" (SWAB 283). It is conducive to the development of material civilization, which is laudable but insufficient, because it brings into being at the same time, on the one hand, an "*orderly pattern of kingdoms . . . ease of . . . means of travel . . . noble discoveries and scientific researches*" and, on the other, "*the development of forces of demolition and the invention of fiery implements*" (SWAB 283). Spiritual progress produces the development of divine civilization, characterized by a balance between material and spiritual progress. The founders of divine civilization are the Manifestations of God, "*teachers, wondrous and without peer,*" who educate humankind "*according to teachings from God*" (SWAB 283).

'Abdu'l-Bahá defines these basic principles of religions as "*spiritual teachings*" (SWAB 285) and says that they are "*the essence of the Law*" (SAQ 47) of all the

Manifestations of God and "*are renewed in the cycle of every Prophet*" (SAQ 48).[6] Therefore, "*the basis of the religions of God is one*" (TDP 32) and any difference among them in this aspect depends only on the expansion of "*the horizon of man*" ('Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ 10).

A resemblance has been noted between this concept and Perennialism.[7] But whereas Perennialism refers to an intrinsic feature of the human spirit, to be cultivated through mystical efforts, the "one religion, Divine and indivisible" of Bahá'í Scriptures is a divine knowledge progressively revealed by God to humankind, available to whosoever is willing to follow the path provided by that same knowledge. This knowledge leads to spirituality.

V. " Their aims and purposes are one and the same"

All the basic principles of religions may be summarized into a single purpose: "*to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men*" (TB 168). This purpose is "*the essence of the Faith of God and His Religion*" (ESW 13). It is so important that 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that should a religion "*lead to malice, spite, and hate, it is of no value at all. For religion is a remedy, and if the remedy bring on disease, then put it aside*" (SWAB 249).

VI. " Their teachings are but facets of one truth"

Bahá'u'lláh writes that "*the words and utterances*" of the Manifestations of God differ from one another "*because of . . . [a] difference in ...[the Manifestations'] station and mission,*" but they "*are in reality but the expressions of one Truth*" (KI 177). The verities explained by the various Scriptures of the world seem different because they describe the same Reality in conformity with the needs of the people for whom they were intended. They are the various phenomenal expressions of the one Noumenon, that is, the one divine Reality. This statement is reminiscent of

---

[6] Sometimes in the Bahá'í Scriptures the Manifestations of God are also called Prophets of God.

[7] Perennialism is a doctrine whereby "a fundamental core of truth (is) to be found at the heart of all religions, no matter how diverse their external appearance and practice may be" (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* 750), upheld by a number of philosophers as the French René Guénon (1886-1951), the Indian Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) and the German Swiss born Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), as well as by the English novelist and critic Aldous Huxley (1894-1963).

Perspectivism, typical of Hick's pluralistic thought.[8] But, as has been said, whereas Hick emphasizes the different human responses to the same divine Reality, Bahá'í Scriptures also emphasize the fact that the same divine Reality gradually reveals itself to humankind in the course of the ages.

VII. " Their functions are complementary"

Bahá'u'lláh writes that

> *each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation* (KI 52)

From the concept of the existence of God and the awareness of good and evil taught by Adam to the concept of the unity of God inculcated by Abraham, from the concept of the due observance of the "*fundamental law of God,*" which Moses "*revealed . . . [as] the real ethical basis of the civilization and progress of humanity*" (PUP 368), to the "*special way of life which constitutes the highest type of action on earth*" (SDC 82) emphasized by Christ, to the union of a people and the founding of a nation upon the divine law taught by Muʾammad, humankind, guided by these "agents of one civilizing process" (The Universal House of Justice, "Promise" 685) has passed through various phases in its knowledge of spiritual reality and in its manifesting this knowledge through its actions and undertakings (cf. PDC 119-21). Bahá'í Scriptures honour all the Manifestations of God because each manifests the same God in different ways and bestows his own precious legacy upon all humankind.

VIII. " They differ only in the non-essential aspects of their doctrines"

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the "*inessential*" aspects of religious doctrines are the "*material Law*" ('Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ 10). Whereas "*the spiritual Law*" is "*the essence of the Law,*" "*material Law*" is its "*form*" (SAQ 47-8). "*Material*

[8] Perspectivism is "(t)he theory that knowledge of a subject is inevitably partial and limited by the individual perspective from which it is viewed . . ." (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Law" deals, on the one hand, with "*practical life ...transactions and business*" ('Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ 10) and, on the other, with "*exterior forms and ceremonies*" (PT 44.11). The outer forms of "*fasting, prayer, and worship,*" the rules of "*marriage and divorce,*" issues regarding "*the abolition of slavery, legal processes, transactions, indemnities for murder, violence, theft and injuries*" (SAQ 48) as well as the ordinances regarding food, all fall under this category (cf. PUP 365, 404). These teachings are "*modified . . . in each prophetic cycle in accordance with the necessities of the times*" (SAQ 48). However, "*[t]he essential thing is the spiritual law—the outer material law is of small moment, because material life has natural laws to protect it, but humanity lacks spiritual education and needs instruction on the divine qualities*" (ADP 64-5).

'Abdu'l-Bahá may have considered the spiritual teachings of religions as essential and the material teachings as non-essential on the ground of the concept, explained by Bahá'u'lláh, that every Revelation is intended "*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*" (KI 40-1). In fact, the teachings which 'Abdu'l-Bahá defined as essential are those whose enforcement changes humankind's character. The teachings he defined as non-essential "*refer to material things*" (SAQ 48), which exert their influence on the transformation of human character only through the spirit that should animate the believers in their compliance with those laws, that is, their love for God, independently from the form of those laws in the various religions.

'Abdu'l-Bahá also includes among the non-essential aspects of religions those "*human interpretations and dogmatic imitations of ancestral beliefs*" (PUP 354) that have gradually encrusted all regions in such a subtle and pervasive way that they have come to be considered as an intrinsic aspect of religions. Since they "*differ widely, religious strife and disagreement have arisen among mankind*" (PUP 141). This issue will be illustrated later.

IX. "Their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society"

The "great" religions are "different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible" (WOB 114), in the progressive unfoldment of one "*Grand Redemptive Scheme of God*" (GPB 139), and their missions

represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society. *One Common Faith* explains: "The declared purpose of history's series of prophetic revelations . . . has been not only to guide the individual seeker on the path of personal salvation but to prepare the whole of the human family for the great eschatological Event lying ahead, through which the life of the world will itself be entirely transformed" (OCF 54). The theoretical foundations of this concept have already been explained. Its consequences on the Bahá'í attitude towards the "great" religions are that "one cannot call one . . . Faith superior to another, as they all come from God; they are progressive, each suited to certain needs of the times."[9] Some scholars have given this concept an inclusivist meaning because it presents the Bahá'í Faith as the synthesis of all previous religions.[10] As a matter of fact 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that "*[t]he teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are such that all the communities of the world, whether religious, political or ethical, ancient or modern, find in them the expression of their highest wish*" (SWAB 304). This statement certainly implies that the Bahá'í Faith is inclusive in the sense of being "enclosing, encompassing" (*Webster*). But the Bahá'í conception of the oneness of religion is not inclusivistic, because it does not deny, but on the contrary upholds, "the ultimate validity" (Rowe 178) of all the "great" religions, as salvific agents, which have the power "*to bring about happiness in the after life and civilization and the refinement of character in this*" (SDC 46). In this vein *One Common Faith* states that the "heroes and saints" of any religion "are the heroes and saints of all" the other religions, the "successes" of any religion are "the successes of all" (OCF 23) the others.

The "God-given authority and correlative character" of Scriptures

These propositions have two corollaries. The first is that the Scriptures of all religions, which are the repositories of each religion's teachings, have a "God-given authority" (PDC 111) and are mutually correlated. The Bahá'í teachings do not confirm an "exact word-for-word authenticity" of all Scriptures, which recent studies seem to ascribe to very few, if any, of them. They only uphold the validity of their "substance or spiritual message" (Sours 96). "The scriptures have not changed; the moral principles they contain have lost none of their validity," re-

[9] Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 19 November 1945.
[10] Cf. for example Fisher and Luyster 345 and Smith 385.

marks *One Common Faith* (23). As to the correlations among Scriptures, these correlations may depend on the fact that, as has been said, all the Manifestations of God take part in the progressive unfoldment of one "Grand Redemptive Scheme of God" (GPB 139).

All "great" religions are "continuous in their purpose and indispensable in their value to mankind"

The second corollary is that all "great" religions are "continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind" (WOB 58). Since each "great" religion is united to all the others in a "continuous purpose," that is, "*to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men*" (TB 168), today each "great" religion may become more effective in achieving that purpose, if it is willing to cooperate with all its sister religions in its attainment. And this purpose is clearly pointed out in *One Common Faith*, when it states that "the texts speak with one voice: religion's goal is humanity's attainment" (OCF 53) of a golden age, "an age utterly beyond anything humanity will have experienced, the mind conceived or language as yet encompassed" (54).

How is exclusivism born?

'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "*Every universal cause is divine and every particular one is temporal. The principles of the ...Manifestations of God were, therefore, all-universal and all-inclusive . . . The . . . Manifestations of God . . . engaged in the service of universal education*" (SWAB 68-9). The idea that Scriptures may include statements requesting the believers to assume exclusivist attitudes is, from a Bahá'í perspective, tantamount to saying that Scriptures are not universal, which is at variance with the ultimate purpose—educating all humankind to love, unity and peace—wherefore the Manifestations of God come to the world. However, some sentences from each of those Scriptures are used to defend exclusivist attitudes. In the light of Bahá'í teachings, it seems that this happened because of misinterpretations of those words. The Bahá'í International Community wrote in this regard: "Indeed, human beings have a tendency to view their own beliefs as right, and all others as wrong. They have, we suggest, erroneously interpreted the tenets of their own faiths as advocating . . . exclusivity" (*Eliminating Religious Intolerance*). Our

misinterpretations of the Scriptures drive us to think that God has not observed the fundamental clause of His Covenant with all religions—loving everybody without excluding anyone—revealing Himself only to a people, to an age, at the exclusion of anyone else, or wholly abandoning a people after having revealed Himself to them through one of His Manifestations.

Bahá'u'lláh assures us that "*the generality of mankind hath been endued with the capacity to hearken unto God's most exalted Word*" (TB 89) and warns that in some people, "*this faculty hath remained undeveloped and hath, indeed, degenerated*" (TB 53). He explains that those who want to discover the meanings of Scripture need "*purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit*" (KI 211). He also explains that his heart should be "*assured,*" his soul should have "*found favour with God,*" and his mind should be "*detached from all else but Him*" (KI 255). These words describe at least two conditions. The first is the capacity to transcend the promptings of the "ego," intended as the consciousness of his body and its instincts, which each human being acquires and preserves during his earthly life and which, if it is not adequately curbed, is responsible for self-centred behaviours, which are unworthy of a human being. Whosoever tries to interpret Scriptures, without having achieved relative inner freedom from his "ego," does not discover their real, implicit meanings. He finds a reflection of his desires in them, that is, those meanings which he may use for his purposes, as demeaning the identity of others and bolstering his own. On the contrary, while interpreting the Scriptures one should remember that "*religion must be the cause of fellowship and love*" (SWAB 299), and one should also keep in mind that "*self-love ...is a strange trait and the means of the destruction of many important souls in the world*" (TAB 1:136). The second condition is avoiding to regard "*the words and deeds of mortal men as a standard for the true understanding and recognition of God and His Prophets*" (KI 4) and seeking "*enlightenment from them who are the recognized Expounders*" of Scripture (KI 256), that is, "*the divine Manifestations,*" Who are "*the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom*" (GWB 75). Bahá'í Scriptures mention at least five significant mistakes in interpreting Scriptures, which may lead to exclusivist readings.

One mistake is pointed out by Bahá'u'lláh when He says, referring to certain allegorical verses of Scripture, that religious leaders "*have literally interpreted the Word of God,*" depriving "*themselves and all their people of the bountiful showers*

of the grace and mercies of God" (KI 82).[11] The importance of avoiding literal interpretations of Scriptures, whenever "*the reality of spirit—its condition, its station . . . spiritual qualities . . . [or] spiritual states*" (SAQ 84) are described, becomes even more evident if one considers that "modern scholarship has disproved many old beliefs about the inerrancy of scriptural documents" (Sours 95).

A second mistake is that some Scripture passages have been over-emphasized while other pertinent passages have been ignored. Bahá'u'lláh condemns those people who "*with one hand cling to those verses of the Qur'án [Koran] and those traditions . . . which they have found to accord with their inclinations and interests, and with the other reject those which are contrary to their selfish desires*" (KI 168).[12] In this sense the Bahá'ís are recommended to avoid the tendency "to cling tenaciously to one Text or one understanding of the Texts and to overlook the significance of other passages of the Writings"[13] and to always keep in mind the overall meaning of Scriptures, because the teachings which Scriptures convey are "a great, balanced whole,"[14] similar to "a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them."[15]

A third mistake consists of interpreting a statement of Scriptures while ignoring their overall meaning in the light of the specific mission of the Manifestation of God Who revealed them. In this sense Shoghi Effendi says: "The severe laws and injunctions revealed by the Báb can be properly appreciated and understood only when interpreted in the light of His own statements regarding the nature, purpose and character of His own Dispensation."[16] Likewise, *One Common Faith* explains such teachings of the ancient religion as "the inferior social status most sacred texts assign to women" (OCF 34) and exclusivist teachings pertaining "relations between societies," which seem unacceptable today, on the ground of the fact that "[a]t the stages of social development at which all of the major faiths came into existence, scriptural guidance sought primarily to civilize, to the extent possible, relationships resulting from intractable historical circumstances" (35).

---

[11] Cf. "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

[12] Cf. "Believe ye then part of the Book, and deny part?" (Koran 2:79, Rodwell).

[13] Letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 24 May 1992.

[14] Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 19 March 1945.

[15] Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 5 July 1947.

[16] Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 17 February 1946.

A fourth mistake comes from renouncing rationality in the name of blind faith in tradition, which implies the perpetuation of past mistakes. Bahá'u'lláh states that God has "*conferred upon man ...the gift of understanding*" so that he may be able "*to discern the truth in all things*" (GWB 194). And thus, He encourages people to read the Scriptures "*in the spirit of search, not in blind imitation*" (SV 24). As 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "*blind imitation of the past will stunt the mind*" (SWAB 248).

A fifth mistake comes when, paraphrasing *One Common Faith*, "followers of one of the world's faiths prove unable to distinguish between its eternal and transitory features" and ascribe an absolute value to scriptural passages prescribing "rules of behaviour that have long since accomplished their purpose" (37).

Scriptures may also be misinterpreted because of the complexity of their language. Bahá'u'lláh quotes a Muslim tradition to explain that the words of the Scriptures have many meanings: "*We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings*" (KI 255).[17] He writes moreover that all the Manifestations of God "*speak a twofold language. One . . . the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled . . . the other language is veiled and concealed*" (KI 254-5). Elsewhere, He explains that He has adopted "*the language of the lawgiver*" and "*that of the truth-seeker and the mystic*" (ESW 14). He also writes that He has revealed His "*verses in nine different modes*" (SLH 27). Since Scriptures are written in so many different modes, it is important to read each of their statements in its context and in the light of the specific "mode" of its revelation, as well as keeping the fundamental verities of Scriptures as a whole in mind.[18]

Finally, five kinds of language have been recently described in Christian Scriptures: "survival language . . . apocalyptic language . . . confessional language ...action language ...hyperbolic language" (Fazel 248-58, 265-7). Survival language should strengthen the early believers' identity, surrounded as they are, so much so at the beginning of a Dispensation, by indifference and hostility. Apocalyptic language, "foreboding imminent disaster or final doom" (*Webster*), should help believers face the catastrophic events that often mark the emergence of newborn religions and remain steadfast in their faith. Confessional language has been described

[17] This tradition is ascribed to Imám Ja'far aß-Íádiq (the sixth Imám, c609-c765) in *Biháru'l-Anvár* (Seas of Lights), the collection of Shí'ih traditions compiled by Mu'ammad Baqíru'l-Majlisí at the end of the sixteenth century CE.

[18] Cf. "Notes" 221, note 130. For a preliminary study of these nine modes cf. Taherzadeh 42.

as "the language . . . of enthusiastic believers . . . of lovers" (Knitter 185). Action language should inspire believers to make the necessary sacrifices to put God's will into practice. Hyperbolic language, typical of the mystical literature of all ages and regions, should describe abstruse metaphysical concepts and spiritual experiences that differ from any other kind of experience. A sixth language could be added: the prophetic or eschatological language, a particular form of apocalyptic language which sometimes sets the obscurity of present days against the bliss of future achievements. Scriptures admonish that this language is complex and will be understood only after the predicted events are realized. These six kinds of language are often expressed in powerful utterances, which, if interpreted literally, taken out of their context, and invested with a doctrinal meaning, can give rise to exclusivist interpretations.

These considerations could raise some objections. Someone could object that they may imply that only the learned ones can understand Scripture. Others could object that the analytical reading that these considerations seem to encourage may invalidate the inspiring purpose of the Scriptures. It is like coldly analyzing a poem without yielding to its beauty. Others could observe that an excess of rational, allegorical interpretation could nullify the practical aspects of religions. Bahá'í Scriptures appear to explain that all these risks can be avoided when the above-mentioned spiritual conditions for whoever wants to discover the meanings of Scripture are realized and an attitude of wisdom and moderation is adopted.

Therefore, the mistakes made by theologians and religious leaders in their interpretations of Scripture are understandable. Nonetheless, they have had grievous consequences because they have grown into dogmas, that is, enunciations of man-made doctrines, whose acceptance is required to be numbered among the followers of a religion.

Bahá'í Scriptures deny that man-made dogmas may be included among the basic principles of religions for at least four reasons. First, dogmas are the fruit of human minds that, as excellent as they may have been, cannot be infallible since essential infallibility is an exclusive attribute of the Manifestations of God. Second, since human beings cannot fully understand reality, each dogma, as a man-made enunciation of spiritual truth, is in itself limited, and thus it remains a hypothesis. Third, dogmas sometimes "*are contrary to science*" (PT 44.15). But *"the religion of God is the promoter of truth, the founder of science (*'ilm*) and knowledge*

*(*ma‘rifat*)” and “knowledge (‘*ilm*) . . . is . . . identical with guidance*” (*Mufávaðát* 99, SAQ 137).[19] Therefore, there cannot be a contradiction between the two. And thus, an interpretation of a Scriptural sentence might have a widely accepted meaning at a certain time. However, later, it becomes obvious that what was “widely accepted” conflicts with scientific findings, thus throwing into question the veracity of the widely accepted scriptural interpretation. Last but not least, some dogmas “*are at variance with the foundations established by the Prophets of God*” (PUP 354), and thus, they are conducive to strife and disagreement, whereas the purpose of religion is to create love and harmony among human beings.

The growth of the body of dogmas throughout the centuries has introduced into “tradition” some concepts at variance with the overall intentions of the divine message of Scripture, and yet considered as absolute verities by religious leaders and their followers, giving “*rise to discord, hatred and disunion*” (SAQ 298). In the light of Bahá’í Scriptures, these elements added to the original teachings of the Manifestations of God are considered “non-essential and spurious” (PDC 109). Therefore, the Bahá’ís “distinguish, for instance, between Christianity, which is the divine message given by Jesus of Nazareth, and the development of Christendom, which is the history of what men did with that message in subsequent centuries, a distinction which has become blurred if not entirely obscured” (Comments 389) in the eyes of modern scholars of religion. In this regard ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said: “*There was no disagreement or variance in the reality of …the teaching and mission [of religions]. Discord has arisen among their followers, who have lost sight of reality and hold fast to imitations*” (PUP 234). *One Common Faith* remarks in this regard: “Over time, 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” (28).

Towards the oneness of religions

The following words uttered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1912 both summarize what has been said in this paper and suggest a way towards the abandonment of dangerous claims to exclusivity or finality:

[19] The Arabic and Persian word *‘ilm* does not mean only “knowledge,” but also “science.”

The strife between religions . . . arises from misunderstanding. If we investigate the religions to discover the principles underlying their foundations, we will find they agree; for the fundamental reality of them is one and not multiple. By this means the religionists of the world will reach their point of unity and reconciliation. They will ascertain the truth that the purpose of religion is the acquisition of praiseworthy virtues, the betterment of morals, the spiritual development of mankind, the real life and divine bestowals . . . We must look at the reality of the Prophets and Their teachings in order that we may agree. (PUP 152, 153)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

'Abdu'l-Bahá. "'Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ and Christianity. The text of an interview with Pasteur Monnier on the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and Christianity, Paris, February 17th 1913," *The Bahá'í Studies Review* 3.1 (1993):7-17.

———. *An Núru'l-Abhá fi Mufávaḍát-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá. Table Talks*. Comp. Laura Clifford Barney. 2nd ed. Cairo, 1920.

Bahá'í International Community, The. Geneva, 17 February 1988, *Eliminating Religious Intolerance.* Statement to the forty-fourth session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Agenda item 23: Implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Document no. 88-0217.

Bahá'í News. Wilmette, Illinois: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States.

"Comments by the Research Department at the World Centre, attached to the Universal House of Justice, 3 January 1979, to the participants in the Bahá'í Studies Seminar held in Cambridge on 30 September and 1 October 1978." In MUHJ63 388-92.

Fazel, Seena. "Understanding Exclusivist Texts." In Momen (ed.). *Scripture and Revelation* 239-82.

Fisher, Mary Pat and Robert Luyster, *Living Religions*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991.

Hick, John H. "Interfaith and Future." Bahá'í Studies Review 4.1 (1994): 1-8.

Knitter, Paul. *No Other Name? A Survey of Christian Attitudes towards World Religions*. London: Student Christian Movement, 1985.

Momen, Moojan (ed.). *Scripture and Revelation*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1997.

"Notes." In Bahá'u'lláh. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 165-251.

Oxford Dictionary of World Religions. Ed. John Bowker. Oxford, 1997.

Oxford English Dictionary. Eds. John A. Simpson and Edmund S. C. Weiner. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

Rowe, William L. *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. 2nd ed.

Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1993.
Shoghi Effendi. Letter on behalf of, 28 July 1936. In *Bahá'í News* 105 (February 1937):2.
———. Letter on behalf of, 10 July 1939. In *Lights of Guidance* 506, ¶ 1702.
———. Letter on behalf of, 19 November 1945. In *Bahá'í News* 210 (August 1948):3.
———. Letter on behalf of, 17 February 1946. In Shoghi Effendi, *DND* 77.
———. Letter on behalf of, 19 March 1946.
———. Letter on behalf of, 5 July 1947. In *Compilation* 1:229, ¶ 506.
Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions: A Completely Revised and Updated Edition of the Religions of Man.* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991.
Sours, Michael. *Without Syllable or Sound: The World's Sacred Scriptures in the Bahá'í Faith*. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2000.
Taherzadeh, Adib. *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 1. Oxford: George Ronald, 1974.
Toynbee, Arnold J. *Civilization on Trial*. New York: OUP, 1948) 13.
Universal House of Justice. "The Promise of World Peace."
———. "To the World's Religious Leaders. April 2002." Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2002.
———. Letter on behalf of, 24 May 1992.
Webster's New International Dictionary. 3rd ed. Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1986.