Religious Pluralism: A Bahá'í Perspective

Introduction

The "problem of the conflicting truth claims made by different religious traditions" is considered by most modern scholars to be "a major topic demanding a prominent place on the agenda of the philosophy of religion."[1] Skepticism and exclusivism have been described as the most natural solutions to this problem. On the one hand, as John H. Hick, a leading philosopher of religion and interfaith dialogue, remarks: "it is a short step from the thought that the different religions cannot all be true, although they each claim to be, to the thought that in all probability none of them is true."[2] On the other, as William L. Rowe, professor of philosophy at Purdue University, observes: "Perhaps the most natural position for a believer in a particular religion to take is that the truth lies with his or her own religion and that any religion holding opposing views is, therefore, false."[3]

The position of religious exclusivism was softened within the Catholic Church in the 1960s into a position that Rowe defines as "inclusivism." He explains the change in the light of a pronouncement made during the Second Vatican Council of 1963–65:

> Whatever goodness or truth is found among them ["Those . . . who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His Will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience"] is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.

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[1] John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1990) 109.

[2] Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* 100.

[3] William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993) 175.

Rowe considers this statement to be "an attempt . . . to address the practical difficulties that confront exclusivism." "Thus," he says, "while denying the *ultimate validity* of other religions, the inclusivistic Christian may still allow that the adherents of . . . other religions may attain salvation by following the paths to salvation laid down by those religions."[4] In the same vein Paolo Brezzi, an Italian historian of Christianity, writes about nonChristian religions:

> it is better to consider all of them as authentic but as evolving towards the one true [Christian] religion, and as realizing, in different degrees, the unique essence of religion. Each will contribute to the general enrichment, bringing something that is its own, but not antithetical to others. In this inclusiveness a convergence is realized which orientates towards the one true religion, like the multicolored rays of a lamp which emanate from a pure ray of white light.[5]

Hick suggests pluralism as "a possible, and indeed attractive, hypothesis—as an alternative to total skepticism—that the great religious traditions of the world represent different human perceptions of and response to the same infinite divine Reality."[6] Hans Küng, an eminent Catholic theologian, agrees that pluralism, when it is compared to inclusivism, is an improvement on the way toward a fruitful interreligious dialogue:

> As Martin Kämpchen, a Catholic theologian living in India, has phrased it: "Up till now theology has taken as its point of departure a *mock* pluralism. *Genuine* pluralism, however, recognizes not only the existence of other religions, but their intrinsic *equal value*."[7]

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[4] Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion* 177, 178.

[5] Paolo Brezzi, "La problematica religiosa del nostro tempo," in *I Propilei: Grande StoriaUniversale Mondadori*, ed. Golo Mann and Alfred Heuss, 2nd ed., vol. 10 (Milano [Milan]: Mondadori, 1968) 904.

[6] Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* 119.

[7] Hans Küng, *Christianity and World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism,* trans.
P. Heinegg, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 180–81.

Pluralism cannot be considered as a totally new idea in the field of religious studies. Since 1870, when Max Müller, the founder of the modern field of comparative religious studies, discussed religious pluralism in a talk at the Royal Institution in London—a talk that "one might reasonably identify as the foundation document of comparative religion in the English-speaking world"—scholars of comparative religion have been trying to discover the "essence of religion."[8] In fact, as Gerrit C. Berkouwer, a Dutch theologian, says: "It is now a common conviction that the religions of the world do not present a disconnected and chaotic variety in which there is no perceivable unity . . . but it has proven exceedingly difficult to arrive at a further pin-pointing of that regularity."[9]

At the present time those who, like Berkouwer, acknowledge the merits of a pluralistic view of religions seem unable to move beyond a passive acceptance in principle to an active exploration of pluralism and its implications. What is needed is a set of principles and concepts by which the pluralistic approach to religion may be developed so that it can open a viable way toward deeper and more fruitful interreligious dialogue. It can be said that the many theological and philosophical concepts contained in the Bahá'í scriptures, together with those from other sources, can contribute to establishing a foundation principle that is capable of moving the advocacy of pluralism from passive support to rigorous and productive intellectual engagement. That process could, in turn, foster the development of what might be called a new methodology of pluralism, the ³rst genuine intellectual tool for the systematic study of the underlying unity of religions.

What Is Religion?

THE obvious first step is to develop a fundamental definition of religion that most if not all participants in the dialogue might accept to the extent that it can become a launching point for discussion. In making such a definition, Bahá'ís suggest the need to distinguish between the way in which religions come into existence (events during the life of the founder) and the ways in which the long histories of religions evolve. The second of these might be called the sociology of religion, but it is the first of these two stages— in the view of the Bahá'í

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[8] E. J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986) xi.

[9] Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955) 160– 61.

scriptures—from which an initial definition of the essential nature of religion can be derived. Thus it is the one that should be pursued first in a comparative study.

Whatever the course of its later history, every religion begins with the emergence of a great spiritual figure within a given social and religious culture who enunciates teachings so spiritually galvanic that they cause new adherents to leave their traditional religion, commit themselves to the new teachings, and through their fervor and sacrifice become the founding core of a new religious community. In time that group fixes upon a text representing and codifying the teachings of their new religious leader.[10]

Each of the founding figures makes similar claims—to be the bearer of knowledge from the divine realm—that is, from God.[11] They are able to attract and unify their followers, to inspire new standards of behavior, to generate visionary goals, and to unleash the energy and motivation to build entirely new ideas of community. The connection between the founding figure and the divine and between that figure and his followers is essentially mystical. Thus those who would study this process as scholars of pluralism have an extraordinary body of evidence with which to begin.

The Bahá'í scriptures give many definitions of religion that may prove useful in creating an understanding of the nature of religion. On the one hand, they define religion as the "science of reality" and "the truest philosophy." It is

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[10] As to fixing upon a text, the pattern is best seen among the religions founded in urban societies with writing systems (the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, Islam, and Christianity). In the case of the religions of Moses, the Buddha, and perhaps Zarathustra, the texts existed in urban, literate societies within a few hundred years of the lives of the founders. Religions that arose in preliterate societies (the religion of Abraham, Hinduism, and the primal religions of tribal peoples) do not display this pattern.

[11] Scholars of world religions have noted a wide range of concepts of the divine, ranging from a personal God in Judaism and Christianity to an impersonal spiritual power pervading the universe in some forms of Hinduism and another form of reality that the enlightened can experience in Buddhism. Sufism and Shia Islam, partially through interreligious contact and unconscious borrowing from other traditions, possess a wide range of speculations about the divine. The Bahá'í scriptures, arising in dialogue with Shia and Sufi concepts, conceive of God as a "wholly other" divine force that can also be understood as a personal God. Thus it partially bridges the many concepts found in the world's religions. In this essay phrases like the "divine" will be used to denote this broad concept of a divine force, and phrases such as "the divine realm" will be used to include such concepts as the Holy Spirit, the Logos, Gabriel, and some types of angels. The term "God" in the passages from Bahá'í scripture should not be understood in the Judeo-Christian sense.

a reference to the body of the teachings of the founders of religions, considered as a priceless source of knowledge that is comparable to and complementary with other sources based in nature and that cannot be contrary to "true science" that "is reason and reality."[12] On the other, they define religion as "the revelation of the will of God" and "the outer expression of the divine reality." In other words, the founders of religions explain what God wants human beings to do on the earth to fulfill His will—that is, that they live together in peace and reciprocal love. In this respect, the essential message of religion is always love, and thus it is also defined as "the science of the love of God" and "the world of celestial attributes."[13] Therefore, religion is in many respects even more important than the other sciences in that it is a fundamental motivating force for the gradual promotion of the oneness of humankind through the instrumentality of love, the supreme unifying power. In this perspective, the Bahá'í scriptures also define religion as "the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things" and a power that can "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."[14] For all these characteristics religion is described as "[t]he greatest bestowal of God in the world of humanity."[15]

Because religions have, from a Bahá'í perspective, a common divine source and share a fundamental commitment to spiritual principles such as love, justice, and a host of divine attributes, they can fairly be described as the phenomenal expression of the same archetype, even though their subsequent historical development is intricately bound up with human projections and contingent human needs and is subject to all the idiosyncrasies re·ective of their particular circumstances and human frailties.

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[12] Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *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, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 297; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*, 12th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995) 7.4; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 107.

[13] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 315, 140, 277; 'Abdu'lBahá, *Abdul Baha on Divine Philosophy* (Boston: Tudor Press, 1918) 176.

[14] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions,* trans. Laura Cli²ord-Barney, 3rd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 158; Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude,* trans. Shoghi E²endi. 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) 240.

[15] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 361.

The revealing of the nature and purpose of the divine—Bahá'ís call it revelation—constitutes the fundamental characteristic of religion. As Alessandro Bausani, a renowned Italian Iranist and Islamist, writes: "to define *religion in itself* experimentally using the declining facts of the present day dying religions is quite unfair." Moreover, each religion has its own mission and should be judged only in the light of that mission. In Bausani's words:

> Obviously, should we think that the mission of Christ was to establish unity and peace in the world, we ought to conclude that, after almost two thousands years of continuous wars and schisms, his results can be considered as disastrous. But should we take the point of view of what I would call "sacred historicism" and uphold the concept . . . that the mission of Christ was above all the *realization of a personal sanctity*, the sanctification of the individual, then we could well say that the existence of but *one* person, St. Francis, is enough to demonstrate the full success of Christianity.[16]

With a definition of religion thus freed from historical accidents, the common foundation of all religions becomes more readily apparent. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), the son and appointed successor of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–92), the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, says: "The foundation of the religion of God is one" because "[t]he divine religion is reality, and reality is not multiple; it is one."[17]

What Are the Manifestations or Founders of Religion?

IF ONE accepts that the origins of religions have many common features, it seems logical that scholars might next pro³tably discuss and compare the founders of the religions— those mysterious figures who stand at the center of the process. A number of ancillary questions suggest themselves: Who are these founding figures? What authority justi³es their speaking in the name of the divine, their critiquing of older religions, their mandating of changes in those religions, and their even going so far as to call for new spiritual

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[16] Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* (Roma: Casa Editrice Bahá'í, 1991) 28, 349.

[17] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdul Baha on Divine Philosophy*
150; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 198.

allegiances? Are these great figures substantially different not only from one another but also different as a group from the great philosophers and spiritual leaders who do not found religions? What enables them and their teachings to take hold in the face of massive societal and religious opposition? Western scholars have yet to undertake a genuinely objective and thorough comparative study of these great personalities in those terms.

Terminology itself presents a problem in trying to define the founders of religions. One has to acknowledge the essential duality of nature traditionally ascribed to them— that they have both a typically human and mortal nature and a revelatory capacity. The founders of religions present themselves as mediators between the divine and humankind, claiming to "mirror" the reality of the higher world and to re·ect or manifest "the attributes of God" through their revelation of new guidance for humanity.[18] While the term "prophet" is traditionally used to describe them, it seems too restrictive, given the fact that the founders of religions do much more than deliver prophecies, and considering that *prophet* is used to refer to many figures who did not found religions. A more comprehensive term, used in the Bahá'í scriptures, is *Manifestation.* It will be the word used in this article.

Conflicts about the mysterious dual nature and the mission of the Manifestations lie at the heart of the often bloody disagreements over religion. Traditionally the question has been addressed by advocates of a particular religion who have sought to establish the uniqueness and supremacy of one Manifestation over another. But an objective, phased, comparative approach to the subject might be more productive. One might begin by dividing consideration of the Manifestation into three separate questions or areas of inquiry: their lives, their teachings, and the effect of their life and teachings on the world.

For most of the Manifestations, especially the earlier ones, very little if any verifiable biographical information survives. Pictures of them come from a pastiche of contemporary reports, traditions, legends, historical accretions, and other nondocumentable sources. Still, it is quite possible, using what is

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[18] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 5.15. Many will object that this concept is ill-suited to Buddhism, considered by some as a philosophy, and not a religion (William Donald Hudson, 1974), by others as an atheistic (Gerardus van der Leeuw, 1956, Helmuth von Glasenapp, 1966) or non-theistic religion (David Keown), and by still others as a religion of the "silence of God" (cf. Adriano Alessi, *Filosofia della religione* [Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1991] 68 ff)]. For further comments on this issue, see note 62.

available, to arrive at a picture of their *perceived* lives. From that one may compare the aspects of their perceived lives that are cherished by their followers, ranging from precocious incidents in their childhood and youth, to the sacri³cial nature of their lives, to their unique spiritual and rhetorical powers, and more.

But any study of their lives must also acknowledge and address the almost universally accepted perception that the Manifestations, while human, also have the aforementioned aspect of their nature that is superhuman in its capacities, insofar as they have an oracular capacity and a perspicacity of vision that transcends the usual limits of time, space, human experience, and the typical processes of reason as they are normally understood. Religions describe that power in various ways, but that variety itself can form a basis for pluralistic discussion.

In the Bahá'í view, for example, the Manifestations have a threefold reality. The first is their physical or material reality—that is, their body, like that of any other human being. The second is their human reality, in the strict sense of the word—that is, their rational soul, a power that they also share with other human beings but that in them is different in that their power of rational perception seems not "a power of investigation and research," like that of ordinary human beings, but "a conscious power," "a knowledge of being," a kind of innate understanding of the essence of things that is quite similar in nature to "the cognizance and consciousness that man has of himself."[19] In other words, the Manifestations are aware of the essence of things, in the same way that human beings are aware of all their physical sensations, powers, feelings, and spiritual conditions.

The third aspect of their reality is what some call their divine reality—a relationship to the divine realm that is qualitatively and fundamentally different from that possessed by human beings. That is, they reflect attributes and perfections (as opposed to emanations) that are traditionally used to describe the divine, and they reflect those qualities with a constancy and power that is apparent to people and that gives them the spiritual power required to change things as they will.[20] This power is defined in some of the Holy Books

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[19] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 218, 157.

[20] Usually each religion ascribes a special meaning to its own founder, whom it considers as totally different from, and superior to, the founders of the other religions. For example, Christians regard Jesus as a true incarnation of the Divinity, whereas, although Muslims

as the Holy Spirit. Bahá'í scriptures describe it as a universal power through which the Manifestations can influence each individual human being on the earth. There is much similarity in the mysterious and powerful nature of the Manifestations that scholars of pluralism might profitably explore, not the least of which is whether Manifestations partake of the Essence of the divine (an aspect of incarnation) or whether they are "as mirrors" in which the attributes or emanations of the divine are perfectly re·ected.[21]

If it were concluded that the Manifestations were more alike than different and that there were divine truth in the teachings of each, other questions would lend themselves to discussion: Why do their teachings so often re·ect apparent contradictions? What is the source of the apparent contradictions? Can the claims of the followers of each that their teachings are foundational—even infallible in some cases—be reconciled?

In the Bahá'í view the Manifestations have two stations—that of unity and that of distinction.[22] In their station of unity, all the Manifestations partake equally of the divine realm and rea¹rm the same eternal and revivifying spiritual truths of the divine. But in their station of distinction "each [of them] hath been the Bearer of a specific Message, . . . each hath been entrusted with a divinelyrevealed Book."[23] That is, each brings a set of social teachings uniquely suited to a specific historical time and place and, therefore, necessarily different from all others. Comparative study of both sets of teachings across cultures and religions could prove fruitful ground for scholars. Indeed, a foundation for the study of the nature of Manifestations already exists within several religious traditions, notably Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which have evolved a series of "proofs" on the basis of which they

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honor Muhammad, they would consider it blasphemy even to think in the same way about him as Christians think about Jesus. Jews consider Abraham and Moses as human beings to whom God directly revealed His will. Buddhists say that the Buddha is a human being who attained enlightenment through his own unaided e²orts. Zoroastrians view Zarathustra as "a righteous mortal man who was appointed to prophethood" and say that his appointment "resulted as much from his righteousness, divine wisdom, and love for Truth as from *Ahura Mazda*'s benevolent choice" (Farhang Mehr, *The Zoroastrian Tradition* [Rockport, Ma: Element, 1991] 55).

[21] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 114.

[22] Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 152–53, 176–81.

[23] Bahá'u'lláh, *Súratu'l-'Ibád* (Tablet of the People), *Gleanings from theWritings of Bahá'u'lláh,* trans. Shoghi E²endi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952) 74.

try to demonstrate that their founder is a true Prophet, centered in the fulfillment of former prophecies, the deeds of the Prophet, and the influence of his teachings.[24] These traditions deserve greater exploration.

What Are The Texts and Their Problems?

THE HOLY texts of the great religions also lend themselves to comparative study and a pluralistic approach, though to establish the meaning of "text" is no less complex than is the study of the Manifestations themselves. Many of the surviving religious texts are at least 1,300 years old, and none of those before the Báb, the Founder of the Bábí Faith (1819– 50), and Bahá'u'lláh were written in the Manifestation's own hand. Holy books or scripture, for comparative purposes, must be taken to mean a body of literature that conveys the fundamentals of the religious experience of that religion, has religious authority, and is, therefore, considered as sacred (that is, revealed, whether the words are considered as having been spoken, dictated, or written down by the founder of that religion, or are words presented as a true and accurate representation of the Manifestation's teachings, while not necessarily being his actual words).

In Hinduism, for example, the four *Vedas, Ṛg Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda,* and *Atharva Veda* are the spoken words considered to be sacred by the vast majority of Hindus. The earliest nucleus of the *Vedas* was revealed "by inde³nable prophets (ṛṣis, etc.)" and dates "at most . . . to the second millennium BC."[25] Some add to them the epic poem entitled the *Mahabharata,* elaborated in the fifth century A.D. by a legendary personage whose name is Vyasa, and often defined as the Fifth Veda. This poem includes the *Bhagavad-gita,* the only text that may be ascribed to Kṛṣṇa beside "the hymn 74 of the 8th maṇḍala of Ṛg Veda."[26]

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[24] Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá,* trans. Marzieh Gail (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 56; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 37–38, 100–02; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 341, 364, 411; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdul Baha on Divine Philosophy* 39– 40.

[25] Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* 21, 371.

[26] "Introductory Essay," in *Bhagavadgita, With an Introductory Essay, Sanskrit Text, English Translation and Notes: Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan* (New Delhi: Indus, Harper Collins, 1993) 28, n7.

In Buddhism, the sacred text is called *buddhavacana,* the word of the Buddha— that is, "that which is understood to have been preached by Buddha Sakyamuni in his ordinary human form." The criteria for a sacred text in Buddhism are comparatively quite loose, but still the first of the "four great authorities" from which one may reliably receive a text as *buddhavacana* is a monk who says, "'I have heard and learned this, myself, from the mouth of the Blessed One himself.'"[27] The oldest Buddhist texts "must have already been in existence a hundred years after the death of the Buddha."[28]

In Judaism the Torah in its restricted sense (the five books of Moses that make up the Pentateuch) is the primary Holy Book and Judaism's holiest text. Most scholars agree with Jonathan Rosenbaum, director of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies, that "[t]he ³nal collecting, fixing, and preservation of the Pentateuch took place in the Babylonian Exile (Ezra 7:14, 25)" and that "the Hebrew Bible . . . was not fully defined and limited until more than two and a half centuries after its latest component part (Daniel) was completed."[29]

In Zoroastrianism, the *Avesta* is the most ancient scripture, and the *Yasna* is considered to be its heart. It contains seventeen hymns, the *Gathas,* written in an older dialect and "hanđed down, it is not known how and how faithfully," which are thought to have been composed by Zarathustra himself and to "present the opinions of the Reformer."[30] Reform Zoroastrians think that the *Gathas* "should serve as the norm for what the tradition teaches and believes." But "the time of its [the *Avesta*] composition, . . . [or] . . . the date of the written record of this fundamental text"—probably not earlier than the fourth century C.E.—is not known.[31]

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[27] R. A. Ray, "Buddhism: Sacred Text Written and Realized," in Frederick M. Denny and Rodney L. Taylor, ed., *Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1993) 150, 155.

[28] Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions* 333.

[29] Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Judaism: Torah and Tradition," in Denny and Taylor, ed., *Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* 13–16.

[30] Alessandro Bausani, *Persia religiosa da Zaratustra a Bahâ'u'llâh* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1959) 24–25; English trans.: *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Bahá'u'lláh,* trans. J. M. Marchesi (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000) 14.

[31] J. W. Boyd, "Zoroastrianism: Avestan Scripture and Rite," in Denny and Taylor, ed., *Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* 111; Bausani, *Persia religiosa* 21, 24; English trans.: *Religion in Iran* 11, 13.

In Christianity, the Christian scripture, developed over five centuries, is "the 'words of the lord' (i.e., the teachings of Jesus preserved mainly in oral tradition) and the 'testimony of the apostles' (i.e., the teachings of quali³ed messengers). . . ."[32] Although the Christian canon cannot be identi³ed with the precise words spoken by Jesus, it is the record of his words and of the earliest response of his followers to his revelation. As Harry Y. Gamble Jr., associate professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, puts it: "The propriety of the canon's limits was defended on the basis that only these documents derive from the apostles, so that their authority rests on *historical* proximity to the events of revelation."[33] The letters of St. Paul were considered to represent "the most ancient stratum of the canon (50– 60 *circa*)," but recent studies seem to have ascertained that the Gospel according to Mark was written about 50 C.E.[34] The debate about what to include in the canonical Christian scripture began in the second century and was completed only in the ³fth century.[35]

In Islam, "Muslims consider their Koran to contain the verbatim record of God's special revelation to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel," and the Koran seems to be the holy text most closely linked with a Manifestation up to that time.[36] The Koran was transcribed by various amanuenses as Muhammad recited it, between 609 and 632 C.E. The canonical text was fixed during the reign of the third Caliph, 'Uthmán (644– 656 C.E.), and only a "few minor refinements of a purely grammatical and orthographic nature were made in the tenth century."[37]

The holy writings of the Bábí Faith and of the Bahá'í Faith, being composed in the nineteenth century, are the written and authenticated texts revealed by the founders of those faiths. They were either written by the

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[32] H. Y. Gamble Jr., "Christianity: Scripture and Canon," in Denny and Taylor, ed., *Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* 37.

[33] Gamble Jr., "Christianity: Scripture and Canon," in Denny and Taylor, ed., *Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* 48.

[34] *Dictionaires des religions* (Paris: Editions Plon, 1990); Italian trans.: "Cristianesimo," *Religioni*, ed. I. P. Couliano and M. Eliade (Milan: JACA Book, 1992) 222.

[35] Cf. Gamble Jr., "Christianity: Scripture and Canon," in Denny and Taylor, ed., *Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* 45– 49.

[36] Denny and Taylor, "Introduction," in Denny and Taylor, ed., *Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* 2.

[37] Majid Fakhry, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1983) xvi.

Manifestation himself or dictated to a secretary and then proofread and corrected by the Manifestation for accuracy. Thus their reliability as literary sources is much greater than that of other scriptures.

Though the authenticity of most holy texts is problematic, as this brief survey illustrates, yet the content of the various texts may be compared (their themes, teachings, cosmological and moral world views, uses of ³gurative language, literary techniques, claims to truth, and universality) to great benefit. They are more like each other than like any other kind of text, as scholars of pluralism increasingly see.

The Historical Sequence

AN especially rich area for pluralistic study is the consideration of religions as historical phenomena, which can be approached from several promising perspectives. The first is to consider the historicity of the Manifestations themselves. Except for the founders of religions in the nineteenth century (the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh), the lives of the great central figures of the earlier religions are not recorded in historical documents. Yet their historicity is generally accepted.

Of Abraham, the Bible mentions only that he lived in Sumerian Ur. Küng notes that "[w]e have hardly any certain knowledge about him as a person; it is impossible to write a biography of Abraham." And yet "critical exegetes no longer maintain today that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are . . . purely mythical figures . . . they seem to have been historical figures." No evidence of Moses survives outside the Bible, and he left no literary work; but today there is little dispute that he was an historical figure.[38] Zarathustra is recognized as "an actual character on the plane of earth in the first millennium B.C.," though he "may not be accurately represented in the meager notices of his life that have come down to us."[39] For Hinduism, it is impossible to identify a single founder in "the divers belief systems and lifestyles that constitute Hinduism." One of the authors of the Vedas was "Krishna Dvaipayana . . . also known as Veda-vyasa, 'Veda-divider.'"[40] Küng writes

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[38] Hans Küng, *Judaism: Between Yesterday and Tomorrow,* trans. J. Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 7, 48.

[39] Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (New York: Arkana, 1991) 209.

[40] Robert C. Lester, "Hinduism: Veda and Sacred Text," in Denny and Taylor, ed., *Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* 126, 113, 140.

that he was "a historic person, even though . . . various layers of tradition have left their deposits on this real figure."[41] The historical existence of the Buddha "was proved near the end of the nineteenth century by E. Senart and H. Kern."[42] The biblical Jesus' historical existence was questioned in the late nineteenth century by some scholars such as the German philosopher Arthur Drews but has been accepted with little question since, and in the last few decades considerable progress has been made in determining some basic facts of his life and teachings.

More significant than questions of their historicity is the great opportunity for pluralistic study that exists in the reported patterns of their lives and ministries. Traditionally each religion has ascribed a unique importance to its founder, whom it usually considers to be qualitatively different (in terms of spiritual capacities and station) from the founders of the other religions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations on this issue seemingly imply that one may gain major insights into their common meaning if, instead, one looks for historical patterns rather than attempting to establish the uniqueness of any one Manifestation. He points out that at the beginning of most religions one sees its founder living among a people "enmeshed in superstition and blind imitation" of the past, oblivious of the divine and heedless of his commandments, divided into sects and creeds, torn by discord, strife and bloody wars.[43] Abraham was born in polytheist Ur, ruled by cruel Nimrod. Moses lived among the tribes of Israel, humiliated under the yoke of the Pharaoh. When Zarathustra was born, the people of his country "sought refuge in fortified oases and fortress-castles among the mountains" from "the exploits of plunderer-nomads and male bands of fanatics that spread violence in the Indo-Iranic world."[44] Zarathustra himself "speaks often of raiding, ruthlessness and bloodshed, and gives a picture of a society rent and in turmoil."[45] Kṛṣṇa

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[41] Küng, *Christianity and World Religions* 278.

[42] Küng, *Christianity and World Religions* 317. Emile Senart was a French Indianist (1847–1928); Hendrik Kern, a Dutch Sanskrit scholar (1833–1917).

[43] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 55.

[44] Paul du Breuil, *Le zoroastrisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982); Italian trans.: *Lo zoroastrismo,* trans. Silvana Brusati (Genova: Il melangolo, 1993) 17.

[45] Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism,* ed. and trans. Mary Boyce (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990) 11.

was born in a time when chaos prevailed.[46] At the time of the Buddha, "Indian society was already immersed in a grievous feudal conservatism . . . Religion was reduced to a ritualism dominated by the Brahmin sacerdotal caste. The coalition between throne and altar the rigorous division in castes . . . [and] the principle of the *karma* and reincarnation, formed a powerful reactionary net."[47] Jesus was surrounded by a Jewish nation that had fallen from the heights of the glory of Solomon to a condition of bondage under the Roman Empire. Muhammad preached among the nomadic tribes of the Arabian desert, who were so savage that they encouraged the burying of their newborn daughters alive. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh lived in the decaying Persia of the Qajar age. Invariably the Manifestations appear in such dire social situations as powerful regenerative moral voices.

One might also compare and contrast the lineage of the Manifestations. Kṛṣṇa, the Buddha, and Bahá'u'lláh were of royal blood. Zarathustra was a priest. Muhammad and the Báb were merchants. Jesus was a carpenter; Moses, an exile "slow of speech, and of a slow tongue."[48] More to the point, none of them held (or continued to hold) any earthly power. Rather, each presents himself not in his own name but as a divine messenger; rea¹rms the greatness of the divine; and summons humanity to draw nearer to it.[49] The various descriptions of the Manifestations' encounters with the divine realm also lend themselves to comparative study. Moses heard the voice of the divine coming out from a burning bush on Mount Sinai.[50]Zarathustra had seven "visions of the Angel *Bahman* (*vohu-manah*—'Good Thought')," after which he emerged aware of his prophetic mission. The Buddha was illumined under the tree of *Bodhi* (a word meaning enlightenment).[51] When Jesus came out from the Jordan's waters where he had been baptized by John the Baptist, "he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him. And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well

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[46] Cf. Bhagavad-gita 4:7.

[47] Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* 23–24.

[48] Exod. 4:10.

[49] For the relationship between Buddhism and revelation, see note 62 below.

[50] Cf. Exod. 3:12.

[51] Bausani, *Persia religiosa* 38; English trans.: *Religion in Iran* 26. Cf. Alessandro Bausani, *Buddha* (Chiasso, Switz.: Elvetica, 1973) 24–33.

pleased."[52]Muhammad heard, in a cave of Mount Hirá', the voice of the angel Gabriel saying to him, "Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created, created Man from a bloodclot. . . ." When he came out of the cave, he heard the same voice saying, "Muhammad! You are the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel!"[53] Bahá'u'lláh mentions "'a Maiden'" who "'[p]ointing with her finger unto . . . [his] head, . . . addressed all who are in heaven and all who are on earth, saying: "By God! . . . This is the Mystery of God and His Treasure, the Cause of God and His glory unto all who are in the kingdoms of Revelation and of creation, if ye be of them that perceive."'"[54] When these descriptions are given a literal interpretation, their differences are stressed. But when their spiritual purport is understood, their common features become evident. It is the same theopathic experience set forth in different words.

No less productively, the Manifestations may be comparatively studied both as metaphysicians and as social reformers, the two being interrelated. Whatever its source, revelation invariably redefines the world as part of a spiritual reality. Revelation "tells us . . . what we should do, in order to sanctify ourselves and society."[55] In other words, each Manifestation calls on human beings to follow his teachings, because through such a behavior human beings will come closer to the divine. In the course of the process of their approaching the divine, human beings are gradually released from the inferior level of their existence, the material level, that is sometimes defined as "evil," and gradually acquire divine qualities, that are defined as "good." Christians call this spiritual process "salvation." It constitutes a spiritual agreement or Covenant between the divine and humankind that occurs in all religions. In Christianity and Buddhism it is a personal sancti³cation; in Islam it is both the individual and the community (the *ummah*) that is saved or sanctified.[56] In the Bible the first germ of the Covenant may be found in Genesis when Adam and Eve were requested not to eat "of the tree of the knowledge of good and

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[52] Matt. 3:16–17.

[53] Koran 96:1– 4; Alessandro Bausani, "Introduzione," *Il Corano, Introduzione, traduzione e commento di Alessandro Bausani* (Firenze [Florence]: Sansoni, 1961) xxv.

[54] Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957) 101–02.

[55] Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* 491.

[56] Koran 24:54; 33:7–8.

evil."[57] Similar covenants were made with Noah, Abraham, and Moses.[58] Jesus renewed the Covenant, saying that he had come to con³rm the Law of the Prophets but also announced a new law, obedience to which would disclose the gates of the Kingdom.[59] Zarathustra appears "as a prophet-reformer . . . appointed by a supreme god Ahura Mazdâ ('wise lord' [or 'lord of wisdom'], to speak to men through revelation" and "[t]he first good step to take is to follow the word of the Wise Lord *(Ahura Mazdâ)* and his laws as revealed by Zarathustra. "[60] Hinduism teaches that "[m]an's faith is awakened by the word of revelation, as set down in the holy scriptures."[61]

Although the question of the Buddha's teaching on the divine is complicated and needs much further study, 'Abdu'l-Bahá numbers the Buddha among "[t]he holy Manifestations Who have been the Sources or Founders of the various religious systems."[62]

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[57] Gen. 2:15–17.

[58] Gen. 6:5–22; 7–9; 12:1–3; 15; 17; 22; and Exod. 19:3–5.

[59] Cf. Matt. 5:17 and Acts 3:21–22.

[60] Bausani, *Persia religiosa* 28; English trans.: *Religion in Iran* 17. Cf. Yasna 29:8, in *The Hymns of Zarathustra: Being a translation of the Gâthâs together with introduction and commentary by Jacques DuchesneGuillemin, Translated from the French by Mrs. M. Henning* (Boston, MA.: Tuttle, 1992) 61.

[61] Küng, *Christianity andWorld Religions* 229. These are the words of the *Bhagavad-gita:* "Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bharata (Arjuna), then I send forth (create incarnate) Myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age" (*Bhagavad-gita* 4:7–8).

[62] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 197; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 165. As to the Buddha's teachings on the divine, he refuses to answer a number of questions regarding metaphysical issues "that he stigmatizes as pointless, and he turns to silence (which in India does not necessarily mean 'no') or denies one by one the different possible answers" (Mario Piantelli, "Il buddhismo indiano," in *Storia delle religioni a cura di Giovanni Filoramo,* vol. 4., Religioni dell'India e dell'Estremo Oriente [Bari: Laterza, 1996] 294). The reasons for this silence is explained differently by various scholars: to avoid "a dangerous confusion with quasi-idolatrous henotheisms" (Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* 374) and "to make a clear distinction between this religion of ethics and the corrupt superstitions of the prevailing religion, so as to prevent the former being eventually subsumed by the latter" (John Huddleston, *The Search for a Just Society* [Oxford: George Ronald, 1989] 26) or "to defend the absolute transcendence of the divinity" (Raimundo Panikkar, *Il silenzio di Dio: Una rielaborazione a cura dell'Autore de El Silencio del Dios* [Madrid: Guadiana de Publicaciones, 1970]; Italian trans.: Uma Marina Vesci and Gian Paolo Violi, 2nd ed.

Bahá'u'lláh writes in one of his prayers: "I testify, O my God, that this is the Day whereon. Thou didst manifest Him Who is the Revealer of Thyself and the Treasury of Thy wisdom and the Dawning-Place of Thy majesty and power. Thou didst establish His covenant with every one who hath been created in the kingdoms of earth and heaven and in the realms of revelation and of creation."[63]

Perhaps most significant of all in understanding humankind's shared, but essentially hidden, common spiritual heritage, is the comprehensive study of the moral principles and laws that form the core of each religion. Numerous scholars agree with C. Lynn Stephens and Gregory Pence, professors in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Alabama, that "there is no simple, one-size-fits-all story to tell about the relation between religion and morality throughout all the world's religions."[64] However, the idea of love is

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[Roma: Borla, 1992] 61). Other scholars suggest, on the one hand, that if only the doctrine of *nirvana* is emphasized, "it becomes quite similar to the doctrines of pure monotheism" (Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* 374) and that "[t]he disputes about the nature of Suchness in Buddhism re·ect disputes within Christianity about the nature of God" (Keith Ward, *Images of Eternity* [Oxford: Oneworld, 1993] 75) and, on the other, that "the Buddhas have assured us that behind this impermanent world and its illusions there is a reality, the Absolute Reality; and because of this it is possible for us to escape from the sorrow caused by the chances and changes of this world" (Moojan Momen, *Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith* [Oxford: George Ronald, 1995] 23; see *Udana* 8:3, quoted in Momen, *Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith* 23). As to the relation between Buddhism and revelation, a number of scholars maintain that since the Buddha is "the only one who is enlightened," Buddhism is similar to revealed religions, "founded on the authority of a particular person who claims to know what is ultimately true" (Ward, *Images of Eternity* 68). Bausani writes that any "revelation is . . . not the revelation of a physical and transcendent science, but the revelartion of the divine will. God does not tell us what we must believe about him . . . but what he wants us to do. Is it not substantially the same thing that the antimetaphysical original Buddhism had said in a different linguistic and expressive structure?" (Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* 26). The issue will remain a topic of discussion, also because, in the opinion of many scholars, "the so-called primitive Buddhism continues to be puzzling, . . . [and] the authentic doctrine of the Buddha is very far from being identified" (Panikkar, *Il silenzio di Dio* 26).

[63] Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, comp. and trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957) 35–36.

[64] C. Lynn Stephens and Gregory Pence, *Seven Dilemmas in World Religions* (New York: Paragon, 1994) 141.

undeniably a part of all religions, whatever meaning they ascribe to their own morality. The *Ṛg Veda* says:

> Like the enlightened ones of the past who used to acquire their share in unity, live ye all in harmony with one another, consort in loving sweetness with all, be one in thought and knowledge. Be united in your purpose, let your hearts be as one heart, minds of all as one mind, so that your a²airs may be co-operatively well organized.[65]

Zarathustra speaks of *Vohu Manah,* "the Good Mind, which is God turned towards man, God revealing himself to man and helping man" (that is, the divine as love) and of *Armaiti*, translated as "piety, devotion, love" (that is, human love for God). Zarathustra writes that

> When, O Wise One, shall Devotion come with Righteousness? . . .
> The future redeemers of the peoples
> Are they who through Good Mind strive in their deeds
> To carry out the judgment which thou hast decreed, O Wise One, as Righteousness.[66]

The Buddhist Sutta-̄nipata says:

> Just as with her own life a mother shields from hurt her own, her only, child, let all embracing thoughts for all that live be thine—an all-embracing love for all the universe in all its heights and depths and breadth, unstinted love, unmarred by hate within, not rousing enemy.[67]

The Torah prescribes: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." It also admonishes: "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people,

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[65] *Ṛg Veda* VIII, 7 (quoted in Jamshed K. Fozdar, *The God of Buddha* [Ariccia, Rome: Casa Editrice Bahá'í, 1995] 57).
[66] *The Hymns of Zarathustra* 15 (Yasna 48:11, 12) 39.
[67] "The Sutta Nipata, translated from the Pali by V. Fausboll," in *The Sacred Books of the East,* Part II, vol. 10, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsiddas, 1882) 149–50.

but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I *am* the Lord."[68] These two Mosaic commandments were confirmed by Jesus as the "two commandments" on which "hang all the law and the prophets."[69]

The Koran encourages one to love human beings for love of God:

> he is pious who believeth in God, and the last day, and the angels, and the Scriptures, and the prophets; who for the love of God disburseth his wealth to his kindred, and to the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and those who ask, and for ransoming; who observeth prayer, and payeth the legal alms, and who is of those who are faithful to their engagements when they have engaged in them, and patient under ills and hardships, and in time of trouble: these are they who are just, and these are they who fear the Lord.[70]

Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Be most loving one to another. Burn away, wholly for the sake of the Well-Beloved, the veil of self with the flame of the undying Fire, and with faces joyous and beaming with light, associate with your neighbor." He also writes: "Of old it hath been revealed: 'Love of one's country is an element of the Faith of God.' The Tongue of Grandeur hath, however, in the day of His manifestation proclaimed: 'It is not his to boast who loveth his country, but it is his who loveth the world.'"[71]

Each religion also has a prophetic dimension that can be studied comparatively. The Bahá'í writings observe that each Manifestation fulfills the promise of a previous one, whose spiritual teachings he reconfirms and fulfills. At the same time he announces the advent of a following Manifestation, who will arise after many centuries. Therefore, all of them are connected with one another in a chain of prophetic promises that show them as all united in utmost harmony and perfect love.[72]

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[68] Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18.

[69] Cf. Matt. 22:35– 40.

[70] Koran 1:172.

[71] Bahá'u'lláh, *"Lawḥ-i-Laylatu'l-Quds"* (Tablet of the Holy Night), *Gleanings* 316; "*Lawḥ-i-Dunyá"* (Tablet of the World), *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas,* trans. Habib Taherzadeh (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 87–88.

[72] The episode of the sacri³ce of Isaac is followed by a divine promise to Abraham, which is a prophecy of future Manifestations (Gen. 22:16–18). Moses and Jesus present themselves

The reaction to the Manifestation within his own culture also lends itself to comparative study. Inevitably, his iconoclastic qualities, with his sometimes implicit, but often quite explicit, criticism of the present order and its moral decline, causes conflict between him and his followers and between him and the culture and its religious and secular leaders. Though he rea¹rms the spiritual laws that form the timeless underpinnings of all religions (harmony, love, and unity), he also rejects traditions that have calci³ed into literal and reductive interpretations of scriptures and deadening rituals. Moreover, he abrogates a number of the practical or material teachings inculcated by his predecessor, teachings grown by then obsolete, antiquated, and un³t to meet the exigencies of a people that in the meantime has changed. He also broadens the spiritual teachings of former religions. For example, Abraham fought against Sumerian polytheism and proclaimed monotheism. Moses struggled against idolatry, restating monotheism and the value of morality in daily life. Jesus con³rmed some laws of the Prophets, but he also disregarded the laws of the Sabbath and abrogated the law of divorce. Muhammad opposed idolaters, as well as certain Jewish and Christian doctrines that had arisen after the deaths of those traditions' founders. Zarathustra denounced "the cruelties of the *Karapans* [the priest-sorcerers] and . . . the *kavis* [the lorddespots], because of the former's sorcery . . . and of the latter's injustice and protection they

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as confirming and fulfilling God's allegiance with His people (Ex. 3:16; 6:2–8; Matt. 5:17) and promise the advent of future Manifestations (Deut. 18:15; John 14:15, 26, 28). Muhammad confirms previous Manifestations (Koran 4:150–52) and promises a future one who will arise in the Judgment Day (Shia Qá'im and Sunni Imam Mahdi). Zarathustra prophesies the advent of his spiritual son Saoshyant. The Vaiṣṇavas, the adherents of one of the three major forms of Hindu devotion that accepts Viṣṇu as the super-God, say that Viṣṇu has become incarnate in the world nine times and at the end of times will become once again incarnate as Kalki Viṣṇuyas'as. Buddhist scriptures mention a number of Enlightened Ones who appeared before Buddha and the Buddha Maitreya-Amitabha who will appear at the end of time. The Báb presents himself as the Qá'im of Islam and the Herald of a Manifestation who will appear after him. Bahá'u'lláh says that he fulfills the Báb's as well as all past religions' eschatological prophecies, and announces that other Manifestations will come after him.

The people among whom the Manifestation appears are therefore "expecting the coming of a promised one" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdul Baha on Divine Philosophy.* 170). But their messianic waits are inspired by literal interpretations of the Holy Book, implying the expectation of unlikely portents and material cataclysms. Thus many of them deny the new messiah, in spite of any clear spiritual evidence of his truth.

afforded to the priests." "An iconoclast, he overthrew all anthropomorphic and zoomorphic idols and replaced them with a universal ethos wherein all former rites were stigmatized in the same way as the mistakes of the *drujevant*, the thugs of *Druj*, the Deceit."[73] Kṛṣṇa was "opposed to the sacerdotalism of the Vedic religion."[74] The Buddha was the reformer of previous Indian religions, "turned into rituals and magic."[75]

The obvious resistance to the Manifestation's reforms also follows a pattern that lends itself to comparative study. Typically, the Manifestation's calls for reform and innovation cause fear and bewilderment among many, especially those misled by people in positions of power and authority. Many reject him, and persecution develops, as history copiously records. The sufferings of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus at the hands of their contemporaries are described in the Bible and the Koran. Muhammad's preaching provoked such animosity that he was obliged to leave Mecca and to repair to Medina. Zarathustra faced "the opposition of priests and scholars who tried to discredit him, by introducing in his room relics connected with the cult of necromancy."[76] Echoes of his anguish come from the *Gathas,* wherein he "complains of the persecutions he suffers at the hands of certain priestly castes . . . the typical figure of a prophet fighting against a hostīlē environment, in defense of a divine revelation and moral concepts."[77] Finally, he was stabbed in his back, "at the age of seventyseven, while praying in his oratory," by a priest of the old order.[78]

The Gathas have references to those who complain about Kṛṣṇa's teaching and express their lack of faith in him. M. B. [The Mahabharata] has indications that the supremacy of Kṛṣṇa a was not accepted without challenge.[79] Even the Buddha "was not spared jealousies of rivals and absurd disputes among monks. We learn from a number of sources that his cousin Devadatta tried to kill him, so that he might succeed him."[80] The Báb was

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[73] du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo* 21, 39– 40.
[74] Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgita* 29.
[75] Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* 22.
[76] du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo* 25.
[77] Bausani, *Persia religiosa* 29; English trans.: *Religion in Iran* 18.
[78] Mehr, *Zoroastrian Tradition* 48; cf. du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo* 27.
[79] Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgita* 29. Cf. *Bhagavad-gita* 3:32; 9:11; 18:67.
[80] "Buddhismo," *Religioni,* 202.

persecuted, imprisoned, and finally executed. Bahá'u'lláh was deprived of all his wealth, repeatedly exiled, and imprisoned for almost forty years. The followers of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were so bitterly persecuted that Ernest Renan, the well-known French philosopher, historian, and scholar of religions, describes the butchery perpetrated against them in a single day in August 1852 in Tehran as "a scene perhaps unparalleled in history."[81] Yet through their staunchness, the opposition of the old world fails. The new teachings become established; the diffusion of the new teachings renews spirituality and morality, brings unity among people and races formerly divided, and creates the conditions wherein a new civilization may flourish. Surely that recurring pattern merits comparative study.

It could prove no less fruitful to study the ways in which religions fall into decline, the way in which human interpretations and rituals gradually adhere to the original teachings, whose splendor is thus obscured. The Bahá'í scriptures seem to suggest that a religion declines "when it falls into the hands of religious leaders who are foolish and fanatical," who divert it "to the wrong ends, until this greatest of splendors turns into blackest night."[82] A spiritual decline starts, whereby love for the reality of the spiritual teachings is replaced by attachment to the forms and externalisms of tradition. Spiritual law, once alive and fruitful, is substituted by "what has been called a 'paper pope.'"[83] Typically religion, which was born as a revolutionizing agent, becomes a conservative force in the hands of the establishment. Love, harmony, and unity decline while prejudice and intolerance prevail. That is, as phenomenal entities, religions have a life cycle like everything else. They are born, they grow, they yield their fruits, and they eventually decline. They need to be studied from that phenomenological perspective. By using pluralistic historical scholarship to study religious truth, a reconciliation may be attained that many consider as impossible, "a reconciliation and a solution of the eternal dilemma between historicism, whereby nothing is fixed, and religiosity, whereby

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[81] Ernest Renan, *The Apostles* (London, 1869) 283.

[82] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization,* trans. Marzieh Gail with Ali-Kuli Khan (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952) 80. Bahá'u'lláh describes these leaders as "they that worship no God but their own desire, who bear allegiance to naught but gold, who are rapt in the densest veils of learning, and who, enmeshed by its obscurities, are lost in the wilds of error" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 214).

[83] Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* 438.

whatever does not pertain to a certain age, person, Church or community is mistaken."[84]

The Current State of Religion

PERHAPS the most compelling topic that scholars of pluralism might address is the state of religion in the modern world. Any objective observer would agree that, in comparison to ages past, the in·uence and the reputation of religion have declined. A considerable segment of the world's population, while identifying itself as believers, would also readily acknowledge concerns about the condition of their faith and its ability to address the world's many problems. In a materialistic and scientific age there are many who would not consider religion as a necessary element in their lives or a significant instrument by which to investigate reality, or even a guide by which to choose patterns of behavior. Scholars of pluralism might usefully do more to assess the actual state of religion in the minds of people and to study both the causes of decline and the effects if it continues. On a philosophical level, valuable studies could be made of the answers contained within every religion to the materialistic philosophies that consider them irrelevant. Equally, a rigorous critique of science, which itself has taken on the status of a religion for many, could prove useful in challenging the unconsciously held assumptions present in the modern world, especially as they relate to "the artificial barriers erected between faith and reason, science and religion."[85]

But just as important is the need to investigate the self-imposed damage inflicted by religions upon themselves, starting with the unswerving belief that their religion is the only depository of truth, whereas other religions are either wholly false or at best minor manifestations of truth, thereby creating deadly levels of intolerance.

In the Bahá'í view, the exclusivism predominating in most religions is a dangerously toxic mindset. In 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá described "the differences among the religions" as follows: "In past centuries the nations of the world have imagined that the law of God demanded blind imitation of ancestral forms of belief and worship By reason of this it has been impossible for the

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[84] Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* 74.

[85] The Universal House of Justice, *To the Peoples of the World: A Bahá'í Statement on Peace by the Universal House of Justice* (Canada: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1986) 6.

followers of religions to meet together in complete fellowship and agreement." He also observed that Most regrettable of all is the state of di²erence and divergence we have created between each other in the name of religion, imagining that a paramount duty in our religious belief is that of alienation and estrangement, that we should shun each other and consider each other contaminated with error and in³delity.[86] The Bahá'í scriptures suggest that the most productive way to see the underlying unity of religions is to complement study of the social teachings (which necessarily differ for historical reasons) with study of fundamental concepts having to do with the spiritual life of humankind such as the knowledge of God, faith in God, spiritual perception, love for humanity—in other words, with all those human virtues that religions describe as re·ections of the attributes of the divine kingdom. In this respect, all religions recommend that all human beings acquire the virtues characterizing moral excellence and maintain that only a person who manifests such virtues in the form of thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds has fulfilled the purpose of his or her life.

In doing so, pluralist scholars would be concentrating on the power that belongs uniquely to religion as the instrument whereby the divine educates humankind. The purpose of every religion appears to be to bring forth human potentialities and to realize a transformation in human beings. As Bahá'u'lláh writes: "if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's niversal Manifestation would be apparent."[87] This transformation, as gradual as it may be, is radical, and affects thought, feeling, words, and deeds.

Collective transformation is a natural consequence of individual transformation. Spiritually transformed individuals possess a high level of morality, a sense of unity with other human beings, faith in life and progress, courage, and loyalty to principles, making those people—whatever their religion—powerful instruments of civilization. As Ervin Laszlo, the foremost exponent of systems philosophy and general evolution theory, writes:

> In the language of the new sciences of evolution, they [the earliest followers of a prophet] can be the small, initially peripheral ·uctuation which can be suddenly amplified in a complex dynamical system when

[86] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 161, 443, 403.
[87] Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 240– 41.

> that system becomes critically unstable, and which, amplified and spreading, can determine the course of the coming bifurcation. Acting with sound knowledge, sound faith and firm determination, men and women of good will can load the dice of social change, bias the statistics of evolutionary transformation, and achieve a humanistic end that is consistent with the great patterns and modalities of evolution that hold good on Earth as in the vast reaches of the cosmos.[88]

This capacity for transforming individuals and creating civilization is demonstrated through history for all world religions. Bahá'ís earnestly believe (and their scriptures teach) that all religions are equally authentic, true, and vital to the well-being of humanity.

[88] Ervin Laszlo, "Introduction," in The Universal House of Justice, *To the Peoples of the World* xiv.