



“The newly born babe of that Day.”
Mysticism in the age of the maturity of humankind

One of the sundry classifications of mysticism suggested by Western scholars describes a mysticism of nascent religions and a mysticism of periods of spiritual decline. The former is characterised by “an emotion which no one could escape” in a time when “all were so deeply concerned with religion that we should say: all were mystic” (Sudbrack 13). The latter is born from “the awareness that beliefs have lost their meanings” (Beaude 37) and from the resulting “intense tension between faith in the Ineffable and the instruments offered by religion” (Beaude 98). In both cases, mysticism—which is, paraphrasing Shoghi Effendi’s words, a state of communion between a spiritual seeker and the Soul of the Manifestation of God that conveys the Spirit of God unto her bringing “such ecstasy of joy that life becomes nothing”¹—seemingly characterises souls endowed with a greater capacity to receive spiritual influences than others. In the former case, mystics are the first to perceive the earliest signs of the new spiritual springtime; in the latter case, they suffer more than the others because of the deadening harshness of the spiritual winter.

The transition from the former form of mysticism, widely shared by the whole religious community, which is the first outward fruit of the teachings of each Manifestation of God, to the second one, an elite that is often viewed as a “denial of the religious component” (Beaude 102) of spirituality, seemingly depends on a gradual departure of religious communities from the spirit of the original teachings that has characterised in various degrees and different ages the history of all great religions. This departure appears to cause the souls endowed with greater spiritual capacities to become isolated. The most evident reasons for this departure and isolation are four: the intrinsic human imperfection, the progressive maturation of humankind, the relativity of Revelation, and the cyclicity of the spiritual evolution of humankind.

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¹ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 28 July 1950. For this definition of mysticism, cf. Savi, “The Baha’i Faith.”

The intrinsic human imperfection

‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, “self-love is kneaded into the very clay of man” (*Secret* 96). Therefore, man “can flutter along for some short distance, into the endless vast; but he can never soar upward to the Sun in the high heavens” (*Selections* 47). This imperfection implies that humans may apprehend God’s “purpose only to the extent of their station and spiritual capacity” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 77). This limited understanding, in turn, leads, over time, to an unavoidable gap between Religion in its spiritual or metaphysical essence and its historical or physical manifestation, that is, what human beings did with the original message of that Religion. Being endowed with a greater capacity for understanding the spiritual reality of religion than others, mystics cannot adapt themselves to the flaws of the historical reality of religion during those times when those flaws are fundamental.

The progressive maturation of humankind

Humankind as a whole is often compared by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to an individual human being who goes through different ages, from “protoplasm” (*Promulgation* 359) to adulthood (*Selections* 285). These words seemingly imply that, although humankind is intrinsically imperfect, it is still going through an ongoing perfecting process.² Therefore, since “human beings are, by their very nature, different one from the other,” and their diversity is due to both “differences of degree which are innate” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Compilation* 1:258) and capacities that have been developed through personal efforts, in a period of spiritual decline a mystic, who has greater spiritual capacities than most of her fellow persons, may be projected towards spiritual goals that seem incomprehensible to her contemporaries.

The Relativity of Revelation

Although the Manifestation of God is omniscient, he reveals a body of teachings adequate to the maturity of those he has come to educate. However, since Revelation is relative, over time, the revealed teachings that are specifically related to contingent circumstances of time and place become obsolete because humankind has developed. Thus, those teachings do not satisfy the mystics with greater spiritual capacities than the others. For these reasons, in a period of spiritual decline, when the

² Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, sections 62 and 63.

teachings of the Manifestation of God have already given their fruits, a mystic may be endowed with spiritual capacities that project him towards spiritual goals that his organised religion cannot even conceive.

The cyclicity of the spiritual evolution of humankind

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

In this material world time has cycles; places change through alternating seasons . . . At one time it is the season of spring; at another it is the season of autumn; and again it is the season of summer or the season of winter . . . It is the same with the spiritual cycles of the Prophets . . . they are always revolving and being renewed. (*Some Answered Questions* 73, 74, 76)³

Each spiritual springtime has, therefore, its winter. Bahá’u’lláh seemingly describes this spiritual winter as a time of “oppression.” He writes: “What ‘oppression’ is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 31) Joseph Beade, a researcher at the French CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) who specialised in studies of the 16th and 17th centuries, describes the experiences of the European mystics of the 16th and 17th centuries, which he considers a time of “neglect by the Christian institution” (93), as “experiences of upset and dispossessed souls, tried by an absence, that is, the loss of what in former days has been seen as the foundation of all certitudes” (92), souls that “regard exile as their country, and endeavour to translate their language of exiled peoples into the language of the surrender to the Other” (93). He writes that they “speak the language of the night,” which they “draw and accept from the cultural and religious conditions of their world” (98).

Features of the Ancient Dispensations

Considering these ideas, we may more easily understand some historical facts of the ancient Dispensations. First, none of the ancient Manifestations clearly conferred the

³ Cf. also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 94-5.

infallibility to a successor and an interpreter, to whom the community of believers would be expected to turn. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that in the past

many of the holy beings who were not dawning-points of the Most Great Infallibility, were yet kept and preserved from error under the shadow of the protection and guardianship of God, for they were the mediators of grace between God and men. If God did not protect them from error, their error would cause believing souls to fall into error, and thus the foundation of the Religion of God would be overturned, which would not be fitting nor worthy of God. (*Some Answered Questions* 172)

However, the “acquired” or “conferred” (*Some Answered Questions* 173, 174) infallibility of those “holy beings” was not openly proclaimed by the Manifestation of God in front of everyone. This fact was conducive to early divisions within the ancient religions and, thus, a departure from the spirit of the original teachings. Shoghi Effendi said, as to the succession in Christianity: “The real reason why Christ did not make some explicit statement regarding His succession is not known, and cannot be known . . . The utmost we can do is to give some explanations, but these must necessarily fail to give the fundamental reason to the problem we seek to solve.”⁴ Therefore, we can only hypothesise that one of the reasons for this uncertainty regarding the succession in the ancient Dispensations is the characteristics of those remote ages and that this fact may have something to do with the concept of the relativity of Revelation.

Second, the ancient Manifestations of God have revealed teachings that *a posteriori* seem to deny a concept explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that is, that “every universal cause is divine and every particular one is temporal,” and thus the teachings of the Manifestations of God are always “all-universal and all-inclusive” and “in the service of universal education” (*Selections* 68-9). For example, the position of women has always been, although partially, subordinated to that of men; a relentless fight against idolaters has been prescribed, especially in the two primary monotheisms, that is, Judaism and Islam. In the light of the concept of progressive Revelation, the prescriptions that today seem to discriminate against women may have been, in

⁴ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 28 December 1936.

reality, a protection of their lesser physical strength in front of men in a society ruthlessly ruled by the struggle for existence. And the unrelenting fight against idolaters may be justified by the need to inculcate the concept of monotheism in a world in which this idea was not yet part of a shared cultural legacy.

The progressive maturation of humankind is thus conducive to an increasing gap between the spiritual potentialities of human beings and the social teachings of the Manifestations of God. Moreover, the exploitation of the religious message by people subjected to the dictates of their lower selves, in the absence of a centre of authority clearly appointed by the Manifestation of God, is conducive to a chasm between the spiritual understanding of the teachings of the Manifestations of God by people endowed with greater spiritual capacities, like the mystics, and the understanding shared by the majority of people. Therefore, the mystics of the periods of spiritual decline become estranged from the human, outward aspect of religion and turn towards its spiritual, inward aspect.

The mystics of the times of spiritual decline manifest this estrangement from the masses in several ways. In their relation with the Manifestation of God, they prefer his union with God rather than his relations with human beings. Moreover, since the mystics perceive the flaws of organised religion, they are inclined to dispense with its function as an intermediary. Therefore, as Beaudé puts it, on the one hand, mysticism has been viewed as a “denial of the religious component” and of its claim to bestow “the means whereby one may be ‘reconnected with’” (102) God and on the other, “the harshest blame put on the mystics came from the devoted” (100).

Prevented from expressing themselves freely in a world dominated by ideas they disapprove of and critical against them, mystics take refuge in the secret of their hearts. Thus, they adopt initiatory and occult attitudes to protect themselves from the official religion, usually entrenched in exclusivist and absolutist positions. Mystics also devote themselves to the quest for impossible inner experiences and unlikely descriptions of transcendence in the hope of finding comfort for their loneliness and a balm for the bitterness of their spiritually oppressed souls. This is the origin of certain mystic theologies, sometimes conflicting with the official ones, and of the search after a consolatory ecstatic union in times when very few outer traces of the presence of God can be detected in the religious community.

Mysticism in the History of the Bahá'í Faith

As to the history of the Bahá'í Faith, the mysticism of nascent religions can be easily identified in the narratives of its early days. Shoghi Effendi said that “the true mysticism, and the secret, inner meaning of life which humanity has at present, drifted so far from” may be found in the communion with “the Souls of the Manifestations,” achieved by the martyrs, that “brought them such ecstasy of joy that life became nothing.”⁵ And the Bahá'í martyrology is particularly rich and documented, and it is not yet concluded. Mystical episodes are referred to in *God Passes By* (cf. 152-5) and the *Dawn-Breakers*. The ongoing persecutions against the Bahá'ís in Iran and the recent martyrdoms in that country, as well as the numberless episodes of sacrifice and selflessness characterising Bahá'í service throughout the world, confirm that nascent mysticism is still alive in the Bahá'í community.

If we want to attain a better understanding of the present and future developments of Bahá'í mysticism, it may be useful trying to hypothesise which are the implications of the above mentioned concepts for those developments. And thus, we should remember some of the fundamental differences between the Bahá'í and the past dispensations. Whereas the ancient Manifestations appeared in archaic epochs, Bahá'u'lláh has been defined as “the Prophet of civilisation” (Martin). Whereas the ancient Manifestations addressed humankind in its “long ages of infancy and childhood” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 202), Bahá'u'lláh announces “the coming of age of the human race” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 206) and addresses a humankind in “the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterise the stage of manhood” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 202). We cannot yet fully understand what this incipient maturity implies for the development of the Bahá'í civilisation and, thus, of its mysticism. We can only suggest a few hypotheses.

The intrinsic human imperfection will persist because “Peter cannot become Christ” (*Some Answered Questions* 231). However, since humankind's perfecting process will continue, the level of perfection accessible to human beings in the new Era will be higher and higher. In this vein, Bahá'u'lláh wrote: “The station which he who hath truly recognised this Revelation will attain is the same as the one ordained

⁵ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 28 July 1950.

for such prophets of the house of Israel as are not regarded as Manifestations ‘endowed with constancy’” (in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 111). And the Báb said: “The newly born babe of that Day excels the wisest and most venerable men of this time, and the lowliest and most unlearned of that period shall surpass in understanding the most erudite and accomplished divines of this age” (in Nabíl 93).

Progressive revelation and the cycles of humankind’s spiritual evolution imply that the Bahá’í Faith will also have its winter. To presume that the Bahá’í world will not experience any decline is seemingly tantamount to stating that the Bahá’í Faith is also perfect for a future humankind. This statement seems to conflict with the concepts of humankind’s ongoing perfecting process and the relativity of Revelation taught by the Bahá’í Faith. Bahá’u’lláh may allude to this concept when He writes that the “‘oppression’” of spiritual winter is “the essential feature of every Revelation. Unless it cometh to pass, the Sun of Truth will not be made manifest. For the break of the morn of divine guidance must needs follow the darkness of the night of error” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 31). Happily, this feature of each Revelation is our concern only because we want to better understand the great present opportunities and the Bahá’í winter seems still far off. Of the Manifestation that will come after Him, Bahá’u’lláh writes: “‘I am not apprehensive for My own self . . . My fears are for Him Who will be sent down unto you after Me’” (in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 117).⁶ He seemingly foresees that the Manifestation who will come after Him will be persecuted by humankind, like those who came before Him. But the Universal House of Justice has been ordained by God “as the source of all good and freed from all error” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will* 14), as a fulfilment of the promise of “the Day which shall not be followed by night” (*Summons* 34), and thus described as “a continuing centre of divine guidance in the world.”⁷ In the opinion of the writer, these words imply that the Universal House of Justice will be infallible in the guidance of the Bahá’í community for the entire course of the Bahá’í dispensation and deny the hypothesis that it will lose its “infallibility” as soon as the next Manifestation exists on earth. Otherwise, its “Day” would indeed be followed by “night.” Then who will persecute the future Manifestation? The hypothesis may be suggested that the

⁶ Shoghi Effendi quotes these words when he states that the Bahá’í Revelation “repudiates the claim to be regarded as the final revelation of God’s will and purpose for mankind” (*World Order* 115).

⁷ Letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 14 January 1979.

Universal House of Justice will recognise and accept the next Manifestation. This hypothesis is seemingly supported by the following statement by the Supreme Body itself in its *Constitution*:

The provenance, the authority, the duties, the sphere of action of the Universal House of Justice all derive from the revealed Word of Bahá'u'lláh which, together with the interpretations and expositions of the Centre of the Covenant and of the Guardian of the Cause . . . constitute the binding terms of reference of the Universal House of Justice and are its bedrock foundation. The authority of these Texts is absolute and immutable until such time as Almighty God shall reveal His new Manifestation to Whom will belong all authority and power. (4)

And thus, the mystics of the Bahá'í winter will seemingly always find comfort for their loneliness and a balm for the bitterness of their spiritually oppressed souls in their Supreme Body, which in that far-off “Day of Judgment” will commit them into the hands of the new Manifestation, together with their spiritual mandate. And, the persecutions against that future Manifestation—and almost certainly against the mystics who will follow it—will be perpetrated by an unspiritual society that will disregard the guidance of the infallible Universal House of Justice. As to us today, whatever may be the conditions of society at large or the level of maturity of our specific Bahá'í communities, we still have the great privilege of living in days of full springtime, when the Sun of Truth shines in its full splendour and the whole community does its best to follow the Centre of the Covenant infallibly guiding it towards that Sun. All that is required is the spiritual capacity to perceive the great opportunities of the present day.

The Bahá'í Revelation, “vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 87), which is today the capacity of an incipient maturity, is free from many of the flaws that in the past religions implied an early departure from the reality of religion and the development of spiritually unacceptable outward attitudes, like dogmatism, ritualism, exclusivism and, most of all, sectarianism. In particular, the authenticity of the Covenant regarding the succession and the interpretation of Scripture; the proscription of “such ordinances as holy war, destruction of books, the ban on association and companionship with other

peoples or on reading certain books,” which in the ancient religions “had been laid down and affirmed according to the exigencies of the time” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 28); the fact that “Bahá’u’lláh has reduced all ritual and form to an absolute minimum in His Faith,”⁸ and the concept that “rigidity and rituals should be strictly avoided”;⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s authoritative interpretations of the spiritual topics of divine philosophy; Shoghi Effendi’s authoritative interpretations of institutional and “political” issues; and last but not least the “clear distinction . . . drawn in the Bahá’í Writings between authoritative interpretation and the understanding that each individual arrives at from a study of its Teachings” (“Notes” 221, note 130)—all these features of the Bahá’í Revelation are brand new in the history of religion. The power of the Covenant and the warnings against rituals exclude any dichotomy between mystical and institutional aspects of religion, typical of dogmatism and ritualism. The abandonment of the above-mentioned ancient ordinances and the proclamation of the oneness of humankind imply that any feeling of superiority or hostility against any sector of the human family, typical of exclusivism, is de-legitimised. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s and Shoghi Effendi’s authoritative interpretations of theological and institutional issues, perennial guidance for present and future students and scholars, and the distinction between authoritative and personal interpretations exclude any possibility of sectarianism.

These aspects of the Bahá’í Revelation were mentioned only to understand better the present opportunities for individual mystical seekers, who may feel free and assured because they are protected from some of the traps into which past mystics fell, provided they abide by the revealed teachings.

The Refusal of Any Mediator Between God and Themselves

Several mystics refused, and refuse, any mediator between God and themselves, not even the Manifestation of God. The Bahá’í position on this issue is unequivocal. Bahá’u’lláh unambiguously explains that “the door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days” is “closed in the face of all beings” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 99) and that “by ‘attainment unto the divine Presence’ is meant attainment unto the presence of His Beauty in the person of His Manifestation” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 169). However, when Bahá’u’lláh

⁸ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 24 June 1949.

⁹ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 30 October 1936, postscript in his handwriting.

abolished the institution of the clergy, he excluded any intermediary between God and human beings besides the Manifestation of God and the Centre of the Covenant. It is not a surprise that Bahá'u'lláh writes: “whereas in days past every lover besought and searched after his Beloved, it is the Beloved Himself Who now is calling His lovers and is inviting them to attain His presence.” In this Day, “the anguish of . . . separation from Him” that afflicted past mystics during periods of decline may be turned “into the joy of an everlasting reunion” and “the bitterness of . . . remoteness from His court” may be dissolved by “the sweetness of His presence” (*Gleanings* 319). And there is other good news. The Manifestation of God has clearly conferred infallibility to the Centre of his Covenant, and the line is indisputably uninterrupted, albeit in different forms, through ‘Abdul-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, as well as through the Universal House of Justice. The Pole towards which human being should orientate their practical efforts is not a hidden pole, as it was the case, for example, with the Muslim mystics, who were thus brought to search for an inward, occult relation with their Pole. Shoghi Effendi may have pointed out the importance of the physical presence on the earth of the Centre of the Covenant when he made clear to a believer

that it is best to assume that generally speaking when people claim they are receiving messages or communications from the Master or Bahá'u'lláh, etc., it is a psychic experience or their imagination, and that they are not in real contact with them. These Holy Beings have the channels of the Cause through which to guide us. They do not need to go outside these and send individual revelations;¹⁰

or when he informed the Bahá'ís that

he never secretly, or inwardly, communicates his instructions to any believer . . . about the affairs of the Cause; his instrument in these matters is the N.S.A. [National Spiritual Assembly, the governing body of Bahá'í national communities] . . . any one who thinks that he is being directed by him in the inner plane is just deluding himself and others .

¹⁰ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 22 December 1947.

. . he answers . . . [the believers] in writing, not psychically, whenever he wishes to do so.¹¹

The issue becomes more complicated when, besides the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, which were incontrovertibly endowed with the gift of infallibility, other Institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order that were not endowed with that gift and that are squarely recognised as imperfect and capable of growing toward perfection, are mentioned. Shoghi Effendi said that the Bahá'í World Order is “still embryonic, and as yet improperly understood”¹² and that “its institutions are not yet functioning perfectly.”¹³ However, he underlined the importance of upholding “the principle of authority invested in our elected bodies.”¹⁴ In this case, the imperfect yet perfectible Institutions are not to be obeyed as if they were mediators between God and oneself. Only the Manifestation and the Centre of the Covenant are mediators between God and the believers. The Bahá'ís are called to abide by the teaching that the unity of the community is more important than any other consideration. Bahá'u'lláh himself emphasised this teaching when he said to two groups, arguing about His station, as mentioned by Shoghi Effendi, “that if they were united both sides were right and if they were divided both were wrong.”¹⁵ The same teaching was emphasised by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when he wrote:

If they agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce the demolition of the divine foundation. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right. (in *Bahá'í World Faith* 411)

¹¹ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 5 May 1947.

¹² Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 9 May 1947.

¹³ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 27 February 1943.

¹⁴ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 30 June 1949.

¹⁵ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 20 April 1931.

The Bahá'ís are required “to master and follow the principles of their divinely laid down Administrative Order.”¹⁶ This attitude is strictly connected with a typical Bahá'í teaching: that the believers “should endeavour to learn about Bahá'í laws and principles and should, as a matter of conscience, endeavour to practice these to the best of their ability.”¹⁷ The “Prophet of civilisation” expects his followers to have a high sense of their responsibility, a sense of responsibility that is part of Bahá'í mysticism.

Heretical doctrines

The vigilance over the purity of the doctrine exercised by the clergy, lest heresy should arise, in the past Dispensations may be compared to the vigilance exercised by the Bahá'í Institutions lest Covenant-breakers should impair the unity of the community. However, whereas in the past, many heresies could flourish, Covenant-breakers today have little hope of surviving for very long, as history has demonstrated. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ascribes this fact to “the most great characteristic of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, a specific teaching not given by any of the Prophets of the past . . . [that is] the ordination and appointment of the Center of the Covenant,” which safeguards and protects “the religion of God against differences and schisms, making it impossible for anyone to create a new sect or faction of belief” (*Promulgation* 455-6). Moreover, the teaching that human understanding of the teachings of the Manifestation of God is relative denies undue importance to any interpretation suggested by any human being, as esteemed and honoured as he may be. In the synthetic words of the Universal House of Justice: “Unity of doctrine is maintained by the existence of the authentic texts of Scripture and the voluminous interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, together with the absolute prohibition against anyone propounding ‘authoritative’ or ‘inspired’ interpretations or usurping the function of Guardian” (*Messages* 56). If we add the prohibition of monasticism, with its specific rules, we may come to the conclusion that the emergence of rigid mystical schools, with their more or less unorthodox doctrines and specific rituals, similar to those who appeared in the past, is quite unlikely in a Bahá'í context.

¹⁶ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 8 may 1948.

¹⁷ Letter of the Universal House of Justice, 19 April 1989.

A Distinction Between the Kernel and the Shell

Muslim mystics distinguished between the kernel and the shell of religion—that is, between the outer aspects, related to the laws, and the inner aspects, related to non-ritual prayer, meditation and contemplation. The concept whereby the inward aspects of religion are superior to its outward aspects is also present in the Christian world, as it is evident in Pauline theology’s criticism of the law. Bahá’u’lláh clarifies the importance of the law not only in the *Seven Valleys* when he states that the Law “is indeed the secret of the ‘Path’ and the fruit of the Tree of ‘Truth’” (40), but also in the first paragraph of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, where he states that the duties of recognising the Manifestation of God and observing his ordinances are “inseparable,” and that “neither is acceptable without the other” (19). The mystical path recommended by Bahá’u’lláh consists thus of obeying the law for the love of God and using the law as an instrument of inner purification, spiritual upliftment and nearness to God, that is, as the main instrument for advancing on the spiritual path. The seeker becomes purified through the grace of God attracted by the efforts exerted to comply with the outward law. Purification implies the development of spiritual capacities of whose development the seeker may be wholly unaware (cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 295). Developing spiritual capacities leads the seeker to draw nearer to God, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained: “nearness is likeness” (*Promulgation* 148). It is unlikely that future mystics may undervalue the importance of abiding by the laws. They will undoubtedly do their best to keep alive the spirit of obedience to the law, that is, for the love of God, so that any externalism may be avoided.

Unduly Speculative Flights While Attempting to Understand Metaphysical Issues

In the past, the mystics of periods of spiritual decline produced complicated, sometimes fanciful and unclear, theologies and cosmologies, perhaps because their human imperfection and the ineffability of the experiences which inspired them were not sufficiently assisted by the words of the Revelation, conceived as they were for an infant humankind. Bahá’u’lláh warns us to avoid those kinds of speculations when he recommends studying those sciences that “can profit the peoples of the earth” and to keep away from “those which begin with words and end with words” (*Tablets* 51-2). And Shoghi Effendi explains that the “fruitless sciences” mentioned by Baha’u’llah are “metaphysical hair-splittings, and other abstract things carried to the

extreme,”¹⁸ as well as those “theological treatises and commentaries that encumber the human mind rather than help it to attain the truth.”¹⁹ Moreover, the contemplation of the themes of transcendence was often viewed as the apex of mysticism. In contrast, Bahá’u’lláh writes: “The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man’s finite mind and are conditioned by its limitations” (*Gleanings* 62). However, he exhorted over and over his followers to meditate on Scripture, revealed several profound meditations on the topics of ancient mysticism—as *Prayers and Meditations*, nos. 38 and 178—and revealed Tablets on those topics, as the “Lawḥ-i-Kullu Ṭa‘am.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advised spiritual seekers to study metaphysical questions and suggested a list of the important ones that should be studied.²⁰ He also said: “You cannot apply the name ‘man’ to any being void of this faculty of meditation; without it he would be a mere animal, lower than the beasts” (*Paris Talks* 54.10). He wrote several Tablets explaining metaphysical matters, as his “Commentary on the Tradition: ‘I Was a Hidden Treasure (*Tafsír-i-Kuntu Kanzan Makhfiyyan*),” his “Commentary on the Quránic Verses Concerning the Overthrow of the Byzantines” (cf. Momen), or his “Tablet of the Universe (*Lawḥ-i-Aflakiyyih*).” Apparently, the Bahá’ís are not discouraged from studying and meditating on metaphysical problems. They are discouraged from doing so through the ancient mystics’ methods and aims. And the Bahá’í Writings suggest new methods and different aims: the Faith of civilisation also differs from past religions in this respect. From the theoretical perspective, Bahá’í Scripture encourages the seekers to pursue the mystical path. However, the “steed” and the goal of the mystical journey—annihilation in God—is service, described as the highest way of life on earth: gradually overcoming the limitations of the self through one’s submission to His law for the love of God. And His law prescribes that the collective well-being of humankind should be promoted. Therefore, Bahá’í mystics are active Bahá’ís, who “love all the world . . . love humanity and try to serve it . . . work for universal peace and universal brotherhood.”²¹ From a practical perspective, the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh on these issues and the authoritative interpretations by

¹⁸ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 30 July 1956.

¹⁹ Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 30 November 1932.

²⁰ For a provisional list of these questions cf. Savi “Towards a definition” 63-4.

²¹ Words by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in Esslemont 71.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá offer a method and an orientation that are precious for the lovers of this kind of study. And it seems that more and more Bahá’ís will devote themselves to this kind of study and activity as time passes. Last but not least, the explanations of institutional and “political” issues by Shoghi Effendi and the infallible guidance of the Universal House of Justice seem a sufficient guarantee against the useless verbosity and inconclusiveness of the past.

Aristocratic and Initiatory Attitudes

Mystical quests have always been an elite, aristocratic activity. The reasons for this fact seem to be fundamentally two. On the one hand, in the past, because of the inferior collective maturity of humankind, only a few could follow the difficult path of the mystical quest, so much so in its theological and philosophical aspects. On the other, the elitist selection of the mystics was favoured by the initiatory methods they were obliged to adopt if the secrecy of the results of their quest had to be preserved in their dangerous religio-social milieu—a milieu in which the physical absence of a spiritual Centre clearly appointed by the Manifestation and the power seized by individuals who were more interested in power itself than in the spiritual guidance of the community implied a blind conformism, that conflicted with the aspirations of the mystics. It is unlikely that these conditions may ever prevail in the new Dispensation. Bahá’u’lláh proclaims: “The mystic and wondrous Bride, hidden ere this beneath the veiling of utterance, hath now, by the grace of God and His divine favour, been made manifest even as the resplendent light shed by the beauty of the Beloved” (*Hidden Words* 51-2). These words by Bahá’u’lláh imply at least three important facts: first, all people “that are in heaven and on earth” have received the “divine favour”; second, the interpretive key of the mystical language used by the ancient Manifestations has been revealed by the Prophet of civilisation, in such precious books as and Tablets as the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*; and third, the new religious Institutions have such a clear divinely-revealed foundation, that there cannot be a doubt as to their legitimate authority to guide the human “endeavours in the path of detachment.” The Administrative Order of the new Dispensation, with its perfect fusion of the best aspects of the three forms of government described by Aristotle as well as of theocracy, “cannot ever degenerate into any form of despotism, of oligarchy, or of demagoguery which must sooner or later corrupt the machinery of all man-made and essentially defective political institutions” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 154). The

mystical path is opened in front of all human beings, and its Pole, the Centre of the Covenant, will remain visible and intact throughout the Dispensation. Obviously, this does not mean that all Bahá'ís will achieve the same level of spirituality. In this vein, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has reportedly said: "even in this great cycle it is not possible for all to attain the highest" (*Abdul Baha on Divine Philosophy* 55).

The Search for Mystical Experiences

Many experts have described mysticism in terms of mystical experience, an experience that, by definition, "defies expression" because "no adequate report of its contents can be given in words" (James 367). Shoghi Effendi has given a new meaning and value to these so-called mystical experiences. He said they are rare and independent of human will and discouraged anyone from seeking them. In other words, the goal of the mystical quest described in the Writings is not having a mystical experience in its traditional meaning but coming closer to God, in one's "likeness" to Him. In other words, the goal of the mystical quest is the development of one's spiritual capacities through, and in view of, service. Bausani quotes a Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh, translated by himself:

Open thy spiritual wings and soar through all the spiritual kingdoms with the swiftness of a lightning. Fling wide open the vision of the eyes and regard the grace of the invisible world. If thou throwest mud into the water it sinks, but if thou depositest a rose into it, it remains like a crown floating upon it: i.e., *ẓáhir* and *baqá* (exteriority and permanence) are better than *báṭin* and *faná'* (interiority and annihilation). In other words weight is the cause of sinking, therefore thou must free thyself from the weight of possessions and, like a rose, in this very bodily frame float through eternity upon the surface of earthly dominions. (5)²²

Bausani interprets this passage as "a very fine criticism of that system or those systems of religious mysticism (so frequent in oriental countries and often a cause of decay for those peoples), which assume that sinking into oneself, shutting one's eyes

²² The original Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh is published in *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárákih* 345 (courtesy of Dr. Khazeh Fananapazir).

to every exterior reality” and as “a religious revindication of exotericism and activity against the exaggerated importance given by almost all religions to meditation and annihilation.” Bausani remarks that ““too often pseudoreligious persons, imagining they are deeply sinking into unheard of spiritual abysses, do nothing more than mix up their own subconscious and unconscious zones . . . Only God . . . speaking through his Manifestations can inspire humanity with creative thoughts, which result in creative action” (5).

The Search for So-called Charismas

Another aspect of traditional mysticism, strictly related to the previous one and typical of Christian mysticism, is the undue importance ascribed to the so-called charismas, that is, those special powers, as thaumaturgical powers, ascribed to the saints, that should be the quintessence of mysticism. The Bahá’í position on this issue is serenely rational, and it is expounded in a Tablet by Bahá’u’lláh, “The Book of the River (Sahífiy-i-Shattíyyih),” Nader Saiedi, who published a provisional translation of this Tablet, writes that this Tablet explains that

human reason is incapable of comprehending any phenomenon independent of experience and observation. If it were not for that actual experience and observation, human reason would not believe in the existence of any phenomenon. If the rationalist argument for the rejection of miracles attributed to the former Prophets were true, then the reality of all natural phenomena must be rejected as well. (31)

Obviously, the possibility that God and His Manifestation may perform miracles is not denied. However, miracles are not considered the usual method whereby God bestows His grace upon human beings because “the miracles desired by people would involve an unnatural interruption in the natural course of divine revelation . . . and far more negative consequences would result” (32-3). Each person receives the grace bestowed by God in proportion to her capacities. In this vein, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: “man must seek capacity and develop readiness. As long as he lacks susceptibility to divine influences, he is incapable of reflecting the light and assimilating its benefits” (*Promulgation* 148). The Manifestations of God guide human beings towards the development of spiritual capacities through the usual method of exposing

them to the trials of everyday life while bestowing upon them the guidance of their teachings and the assistance of spiritual powers attracted by the efforts exerted by human beings while trying to follow the divine guidance. Bahá'u'lláh promises the development of great capacities to any seeker who makes sincere efforts in His way. For example, in the *Seven Valleys*, he writes on the results of a sincere spiritual quest: “yearning would . . . draw thee from the earthly homeland to the first, heavenly abode in the Center of Realities, and lift thee to a plane wherein thou wouldst soar in the air even as thou walkest upon the earth, and move over the water as thou runnest on the land” (3-4). And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes to a spiritual seeker:

I now assure thee, O servant of God, that, if thy mind become empty and pure from every mention and thought and thy heart attracted wholly to the Kingdom of God, forget all else besides God and come in communion with the Spirit of God, then the Holy Spirit will assist thee with a power which will enable thee to penetrate all things, and a Dazzling Spark which enlightens all sides, a Brilliant Flame in the zenith of the heavens, will teach thee that which thou dost not know of the facts of the universe and of the divine doctrine. (*Tablets* 3:706-7).

But these capacities are acquired through sacrifice and according to the usual divine method. Bahá'u'lláh writes: “Know ye that trials and tribulations have, from time immemorial, been the lot of the chosen Ones of God and His beloved, and such of His servants as are detached from all else but Him . . . Such is God’s method carried into effect of old, and such will it remain in the future” (*Gleanings* 129).

Withdrawing from the World

One innovation of the Bahá'í Faith is that spiritual confirmation has been bestowed upon issues that the modern world can hardly recognise as spiritual concerns and views as social topics. The so-called twelve principles of the Faith are not mere social statements; they are spiritual principles, that is, descriptions of the spiritual reality of human relations. Abiding by these principles is as important as observing the laws of prayer, fasting, meditation and daily reading of the Holy Texts. If these principles are not complied with, there is no progress in the mystical path. They are not part of the shell but of the kernel of the Faith. In the light of these remarks,

withdrawing from the world, if not just for very short periods, as Bahá'u'lláh did in Sulaymaniyyih and Shoghi Effendi in Switzerland, is not part of the Bahá'í mystical path, whose fundamental part is the journey of return from God to one's fellow-beings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has reportedly said: "That which is truly spiritual must light the path to God, and must result in deeds. We cannot believe the call to be spiritual when there is no result" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 107).

If we add the obligation of giving a spiritual education to our children since their early infancy, we may suppose that the future mystics will begin their journey on higher and higher mystical levels. Therefore, envisioning which spiritual goals will be gradually attained and which fruits will be reaped in the Bahá'í summer and early autumn is difficult. As for today, it is enough to understand that the divine springtime is well advanced, that we are all encompassed by the divine grace and that the greater spiritual capacities we will be able to develop through our mystical efforts in the path of service, the greater will be our practical results in our foremost task: promoting the oneness of humankind. And perhaps we may see the realisation of the words written by the Báb:

God hath, according to that which is revealed in the Book, taken upon Himself the task of ensuring the ascendancy of any one of the followers of the Truth, over and above one hundred other souls, and the supremacy of one hundred believers over one thousand non-believers and the domination of one thousand of the faithful over all the peoples and kindreds of the earth; inasmuch as God calleth into being whatsoever He willeth by virtue of His behest. (153)

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