



“...Let the sweetness of His presence dissolve the bitterness of your remoteness from His court:” Mystical aspects of the Bahá’í Faith.

Before sharing my reflections on the “Mystical aspects of the Bahá’í Faith,” I would like to give you some information. I will quote from the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith; of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, His son and appointed Successor and authorized Interpreter of His words; of Shoghi Effendi, the great-grandson of Bahá’u’lláh, the appointed successor of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and authorized interpreter of the Bahá’í teachings; and of the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the Bahá’í Faith, ordained by Bahá’u’lláh as the agency invested with authority to legislate on matters not covered in His writings. I would also like to explain the meaning of a locution I will often mention: “Manifestation of God.” This Bahá’í locution denotes the Prophets who founded an independent religion, such as Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and Bahá’u’lláh. Theologically, the Manifestation of God is compared to a perfect mirror reflecting all the Attributes of God; He is “the True Educator Who possesses all human perfections.”¹ Finally, the word “Tablet” denotes letters penned by Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi² said that “The Bahá’í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is . . . fundamentally mystic in character.”³ If we read the definitions of “mystic,” “mystical,” and “mysticism” in the *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language Second Edition Unabridged*, which is the English dictionary most likely used by Shoghi Effendi (see Rabbani 197), or the more recent *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (Great Dictionary of the Italian

Speech delivered in an online meeting organised by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 30 March 2023, 18:30 (Israel Time).

¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 199, sec.45, para.8.

² (1897-1967), Bahá’u’lláh’s (see note 4) great-grandson, appointed the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith and the authorised Interpreter of its teachings by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (see note 7).

Speech delivered in an online meeting organised by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 30 March 2023, 18:30 (Israel Time).

³ In *Prayer and Devotional Life*, no.71, 8 December 1935, to an individual believer).

Language) founded by Salvatore Battaglia (1961-2002), we find several connotations, some of which do not fit the Bahá'í Faith at all, and others only marginally. We will examine a number of these definitions to gain a better understanding of what Shoghi Effendi meant when he used the adjectives “mystic” and “mystical” and the noun “mysticism” while speaking of the Bahá'í Faith:

First: Webster describes the adjective “mystic” as “pertaining to any occult or esoteric rite” (1621) and the noun “mystic” as “One initiated into a mystery.” Shoghi Effendi wrote that “the principle of the Oneness of Mankind” is “the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh⁴ revolve” (*World Order* 42). How could a religion that teaches this highly inclusive principle be “esoteric” and open only to a small group of “initiates”?

Second: Webster describes the adjective “mystic” as “pertaining to . . . the mystical experience . . . baffling or incomprehensible to the understanding” (1621) and the adjective “mystical” as “having a spiritual meaning . . . neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence” (1621). However, Bahá'u'lláh writes in His Kitáb-i-Aqdas (31, para.36):

. . . among the people is he who layeth claim to inner knowledge, and still deeper knowledge concealed within this knowledge . . . Thou speakest false . . . What thou dost possess is naught but husks which We have left to thee as bones are left to dogs.

And the Universal House of Justice⁵ explains these words as referring “to people who claim access to esoteric knowledge and whose attachment to such knowledge veils them from the Revelation of the Manifestation of God” (“Notes” 194, no.60).⁶

⁴ (1817-1892), the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

⁵ The supreme governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh as the agency invested with authority to legislate on matters not covered in His writings. It gives spiritual guidance to and directs the administrative activities of the world-wide Bahá'í community.

⁶ “Manifestation of God” is a Bahá'í locution denoting the Prophets who founded an independent religion, such as Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad. Theologically, the Manifestation of God is compared to a perfect mirror reflecting all the Attributes of God. He is “the True Educator

Therefore, Bahá'u'lláh admonishes that an inner knowledge born of a mystical experience, “incomprehensible to the understanding,” “nor obvious to the intelligence,” far from being an infallible blessing, can be an obstacle to one’s understanding of the precious words of the Holy Scriptures.

Third: Webster describes the adjective “mystical” as “manifesting an individual’s direct or intimate knowledge of . . . God” (1621). In this vein, the Anglican writer, novelist, and metaphysical poet Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) defined mysticism as “the direct intuition or experience of God” and a mystic as “a person who has, to a greater or less degree, such a direct experience” (*Mystics* 9). Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly states that God is unknowable. He expounds on this concept in His Kitáb-i-Íqán (1862), His major doctrinal work. He writes (98, para.104):

To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being . . . will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men.

Fourth: Webster describes the adjective “mystical” as “based upon intuition, insight . . . or similar subjective experience . . . Remote from ordinary human knowledge or comprehension” (1621); and defines “insight” as “the act . . . of apprehending the inner nature of things” (1285). However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá⁷ says that the essence of things is “unknown and unfathomed” and can be perceived “only through its attributes.”⁸ And specifically, Bahá'u'lláh denies that human beings can understand the “inner nature” of the human soul (*Gleanings* 158-9, sec.82, para.1); its “nature . . . after death,”⁹ or “the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of

Who Possesses all human perfections” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 199, sec.45, para.8). All the Manifestations of God “have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth” (ibid. 156-7, sec. LXXXI) and have revealed Themselves One after the Other “to the world in direct proportion to its capacity and spiritual receptiveness” (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán 107-8, para.114).

⁷ (1844-1921), Bahá'u'lláh’s son, Whom He appointed His successor and the authorized Interpreter of His Words.

⁸ *Some Answered Questions* 253, sec.59, para.3.

⁹ Ibid. 156, LXXXI, Lawḥ-i-‘Abdu’l-Vahháb.

man.”¹⁰ Therefore, the concept that human beings may have access to the knowledge of “the inner nature of things” is also alien to the Bahá’í Faith.

Fifth: Webster describes mysticism as “the doctrine . . . that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, of ultimate reality . . . is attainable . . . in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or ratiocination” (1621). In this vein, Battaglia writes that mysticism “is characterized by its alogicality wherefrom a purely rational knowledge is excluded” (10:575). Bahá’u’lláh ascribes a great value to “the gift of understanding” (*Gleanings* 194, sec.95, para.1), which has been conferred upon human beings to enable them “to know and recognize the one true God . . . to discern the truth in all things,” to lead them “to that which is right,” and help them “to discover the secrets of creation” (ibid.). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that our intellect is “the most precious gift bestowed upon man by the Divine Bounty.”¹¹ Although “inspiration,” or insight, is listed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá among His four criteria of knowledge, its absolute value is denied.¹² As Shoghi Effendi commented in a letter written on his behalf, “It often happens that the latter [insight] results in completely misrepresenting the truth, and thus becomes a source of error rather than of guidance.”¹³ He wrote indeed that the Bahá’í Faith is “scientific in its method” (*The Bahá’í Faith*, June 1933). It seems, therefore, that alogicality is not highly valued in the Bahá’í Scriptures.

Sixth: According to Battaglia, mysticism is characterized by “the mystical impulse, which implies a closure toward the external world” (10:575). In this vein, Underhill remarks that mysticism “is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging, or improving anything in the visible universe” (*Mysticism* 81). However, Bahá’u’lláh writes (*Gleanings* 215, sec109, para.2):

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.

Address yourselves to the promotion of the well-being and tranquillity of the children of men. Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and

¹⁰ Ibid. 165, sec. LXXXIII, para.1, Lawḥ-i-Hádí.

¹¹ *Paris Talks* 32, sec.11, para.4, 26 October 1911.

¹² See *Promulgation* 30, para.5, 17 April 1912.

¹³ In *Prayer and Devotional Life*, no.99, 28 October 1938, to an individual believer.

kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may . . . be blotted out from its face . . . (ibid. 333-4, sec.156)

Living in seclusion or practicing asceticism is not acceptable in the presence of God. (*Tablets* 71, *Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih*)

It is abundantly evident, therefore, that Bahá'u'lláh disapproves of any “closure toward the external world” and that He calls on human beings to commit themselves to improving life here on earth.

Seventh: Battaglia says that the main feature of mysticism is “ecstasy” (5:428), which he describes as “A psychic state in which the subject is estranged from the external world and detaches himself from it, as he is no longer mentally present to the phenomena of normal experience” (5:428). He observes that “in non-Christian religions” ecstasy

is often accompanied by pathological phenomena to whose production human action contributes in large part through abstinence, solitude, intoxicating drinks, orgiastic dances . . . (10:575)

And the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (ODWR) associates mystical experiences typical of mysticism “with certain kinds of chemical- and drug-induced experiences” (671).

Undeniably some of the Bahá'í Writings mention “the holy ecstasy of prayer” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Bahá'í Prayers* 69). For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote in one of His prayers:

Reveal then Thyself, O Lord, by Thy merciful utterance and the mystery of Thy divine being, that the holy ecstasy of prayer may fill our souls—a prayer that shall rise above words and letters and transcend the murmur of syllables and sounds—that all things may be merged into nothingness before the revelation of Thy splendor. (ibid.)

Ecstasy is described in the Bahá'í texts as a possible experience in personal life. But its attainment is never listed among the purposes of life. No one is encouraged to seek it, as the mystics recommended, “through abstinence, solitude, intoxicating drinks, orgiastic dances” (Battaglia 10:575). Indeed, in a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi explained:¹⁴

Truly mystical experiences based on reality are very rare, and we can readily see how dangerous it is for people to go groping about in the darkness of their imagination after the true thing . . .

Then he added:

If we are going to have some deeply spiritual experience we can rest assured God will vouchsafe it to us without having to look for it. (ibid.)

Ecstasy and mystical experiences, therefore, take on a very different meaning in the Bahá'í Faith. They are personal experiences that God may grant according to His inscrutable will to those He wants and are certainly not among the goals to be pursued in one's life, much less using weird methods. Bahá'ís are encouraged to follow the guidance of the writings and their institutions and to pay attention to the confirmations that life itself gives or denies to their initiatives.

We have seen that at least seven of the connotations usually associated with the idea of mysticism are not part of the Bahá'í Faith. Fortunately, Shoghi Effendi himself specified what he meant when he spoke of mysticism in two letters written on his behalf. From his explanations, we can deduce that, in the Bahá'í perspective, as authoritatively explained by him, mysticism has two significant connotations. The first is interior and personal: we “must learn to commune with” the Manifestations of God, because this¹⁵

is the true mysticism, and the secret, inner meaning of life . . .

¹⁴ In *Lights of Guidance* 514, no.1742, 25 October 1942, to an individual believer.

¹⁵ In *Unfolding Destiny* 406-7, 28 July 1950, to Manchester Spiritual Assembly.

The second aspect is exterior and practical. As has been said, Shoghi Effendi remarked that the “Bahá’í Faith... is . . . fundamentally mystic in character.”¹⁶ Having said that, he added that the chief goal of the Bahá’í Faith “is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers”; that the Bahá’ís should develop their inner spiritual lives to avoid their religion to “degenerate into a mere organization” deprived of inner life; that prayer is “absolutely indispensable to . . . [their] inner spiritual development,” and that this is “the very foundation and purpose of the religion of God” (ibid.). In other words, from a Bahá’í perspective, mysticism means acquiring “spiritual virtues and powers” through our communion with the Manifestation of God, attaining our “inner spiritual development,” and using those virtues and powers to transform society.

We have tried to understand from the Bahá’í Writings some of the meanings of these crucial connotations of mysticism. This search has led us to see the Bahá’í Faith as a mystical way, to discover differences and similarities between this way and the ancient traditions, and to identify its purposes. We have seen that Bahá’u’lláh Himself refers to His Faith words and locutions frequently used by the mystics of Islam to describe their “mystical ways.” For example, He uses *sabíl*: “A way, road, path” (Steingass 650); and *ṣirátu’l-mustaqím*, a Koranic locution in the opening Súra: “Guide Thou us in the straight path” (1:5); this locution connotes the path of the true believers, of the righteous, or the blessed;¹⁷ and may have been one of the starting points for the symbol of the mystic as a traveler searching for the straight path. In this vein, Bahá’u’lláh writes:¹⁸

We have truly . . . summoned all men unto the straight Path (*ṣirát*) . . .

In this Day the Straight Path (*sabíl-i-mustaqím*) is made manifest . . .¹⁹

¹⁶ In *Prayer and Devotional Life*, no.71, 8 December 1935, to an individual believer.

¹⁷ See Koran 6:153, 43:43, 90:8-12, and 3:101.

¹⁸ *Tablets* 254, no.14, para.3, *Majmu‘ih* 160, para.80.

¹⁹ *Tablets* 255; *Majmu‘ih* 162, para.87.

The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth (*ṣirát-i-mustaqím-i-ḥaqq*).²⁰

We will now examine more closely the mystical way as outlined by Bahá'u'lláh. His foremost description of the mystical way may be found in an epistle entitled The Seven Valleys (SV), His foremost mystical composition, and is stated succinctly in the fourth Tablet²¹ included in *The Call of the Divine Beloved*, a collection of mystic writings by Bahá'u'lláh (65-8, sec.4). The Seven Valleys describes the path of those who pursue their own “inner spiritual development,” mentioning seven “stages that mark the wayfarers’ journey from their mortal abode to the heavenly homeland” (SV15, para.6). This book is deliberately written in the language of the Sufis, the mystics of Islam. But a deeper perusal reveals that Bahá'u'lláh’s ideas on the mystical way are quite different from those of the Sufis.

According to most of the Sufis, the mystical way is covered by degrees or stations, which are sometimes compared to the steps of a ladder. Each step is a particular manner of being, gradually acquired by the seekers due to their striving toward perfection under the guidance of an initiated master and as a fruit of divine assistance. Reaching a specific degree or station means having a total and permanent (intellectual and spiritual) experience of that station. Therefore, according to the Sufis, a “station” is a permanent condition or manner of being, attained through daily exertion toward perfection and by the assistance of the divine bounty.

The itinerary described by Bahá'u'lláh in the Seven Valleys consists of seven stages: “Search” (SV15, para.7), “Love” (SV18, para.14), “Knowledge” (SV21, para.23), “Unity” (SV27, para.35), “Contentment” (SV39, para.61), “Wonderment” (SV44, para.65), and “True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness” (SV45, para.76). A similar itinerary is described in *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, another Tablet penned by Bahá'u'lláh and related to the Seven Valleys and to the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, which successively lists: “Search” (Gems 27, para.36), “Love and Rapture” (Gems 28, para.38), “Divine Unity” (Gems 30, para.39), and mentions separately a “city of knowledge”

²⁰ *Gleanings* 156-7, sec.81; *Muntakhabátí* 106.

²¹ Letters penned by Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

(Gems 15, para.17). The next stages listed in Gems of Divine Mysteries, that is “Wonderment” (Gems 67, para.95), “Absolute Nothingness” (Gems 70, para.101), “Immortality” (Gems 72, para.105), and “a City that hath no name or description” (Gems 77, para.114), are different from the last three stages described in the Seven Valleys, “Contentment” (SV39, para.61), “Wonderment” (SV41, para.65), and “True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness” (SV45, para.76). At the end of Gems of Divine Mysteries Bahá’u’lláh writes that because of the haste imposed by circumstances He could not complete “the description of these stages in a seemly and befitting manner” and was obliged to omit “the description of major cities and . . . [even] the mention of the two exalted journeys of Resignation and Contentment” (Gems 77-8, para.115). In another Tablet, He remarks: “A myriad names and attributes have been ascribed to these degrees and stations, which I am disinclined to mention here” (*Call* 80, sec.6, para.11). Finally, in Gems of Divine Mysteries, after describing “the City of Immortality” (Gems 72, para.105), He writes: “Know . . . that should one who hath attained unto these stations . . . fall prey to pride and vainglory, he would at that very moment come to naught and return to the first step without realizing it” (Gems 74, para.109).

From these statements and after a careful study of His Writings, it seems that the mystical way as described by Bahá’u’lláh is not a strict sequence of stations, following one another in the same direction like the stages of an earthly journey, but an ever-repeated itinerary in the life of the seekers who strive to pursue their “inner spiritual development.” As the seekers proceed along their inner path, they become increasingly aware of the spiritual realities enshrined in their souls. Moreover, each station described in the Seven Valleys and Gems of Divine Mysteries should be considered, like other spiritual realities, as an ideal model to be pursued, but that will never be achieved in its perfection. Perfection is a part of the divine, not human, reality.

The first step in the mystical way is “search.” Bahá’u’lláh extensively describes it in various Writings, including the Valley of Search of the Seven Valleys and the City

of Search of Gems of Divine Mysteries.²² In this Valley the seeker strives hard to discover “the beauty of the Friend” (SV15, para.7), “the Well-Beloved . . . the Adored One” (SV16, para.9), “the Lord of Lords” (SV17, para.11), or “God” Himself (Gems 28, para.37). It is not difficult to understand that the supreme object of this quest is not any human master, as for the Sufis, but the Manifestation of God Himself. And this reminds us of the injunction of the first verse of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Mother Book of the Bahá’í Faith (19, para.1):

The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him . . . Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation . . . It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station . . . to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world.

The starting point of the mystical way, as outlined by Bahá’u’lláh is, therefore, recognizing the divine Manifestation. It seems useful to repeat here that “Manifestation of God” is a Bahá’í locution denoting the Prophets who founded an independent religion, such as Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and Bahá’u’lláh. Theologically, the Manifestation of God is compared to a perfect mirror reflecting all the Attributes of God. He is “the True Educator Who Possesses all human perfections.”²³ All the Manifestations of God “have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth,”²⁴ and have revealed Themselves One after the Other “to the world in direct proportion to its capacity and spiritual receptiveness.”²⁵ Bahá’u’lláh explains in His Kitáb-i-Íqán that whosoever has recognized the Manifestations of God “hath verily attained unto the ‘Presence of God’ Himself” (143, para.150). In this context, we can deduce that the Bahá’í mystical way is the same as our mystical return unto God, as described in the Koran: “Verily we are of God, and to Him is our return” (2:156).

²² See also the five paragraphs of the Kitáb-i-Íqán known as the “Tablet of the True Seeker” (KI192-8, para.213-8), and the *Lawḥ-i-Aḥmad bih Fársí*, a Tablet describing “the path of faith and belief” (Taherzadeh 2:137-8), partially translated in *Gleanings*, pp.322-29, sec.152 and 153.

²³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 199, sec.45, para.8.

²⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 156-7, sec. 81.

²⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán 107-8, para.114.

The human soul, created in the heavenly worlds and descended on earth unaware of its divine origin, will return to those worlds at the moment of physical death with such awareness of itself as it has acquired through its earthly experience. It is vital for the soul to recognize here on earth the Manifestation of God because He will help the soul to recognize the divine attributes in itself by giving them practical expression in its own life and therefore to recognize God Himself not in His Essence, but in His attributes: this is the meaning of “inner spiritual development.” As the soul advances on this path of recognition of the Divinity through discovering His attributes potentially infused into itself, the soul draws closer and closer to God, and thus metaphorically returns unto Him. It is the practical realization of the tradition ascribed to Muhammad that says: “He hath known God who hath known himself.”²⁶

Whosoever has recognized the Manifestation of God has absolved the “first duty prescribed by God for His servants,” and thus has entered the mystical way. Bahá’u’lláh also asks His followers to surrender themselves to His hands with total confidence. But at the same time, He does not ask for blind obedience, “like a corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead,” as the Sufi masters did. He writes very clearly:

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor . . .
(Arabic Hidden Words, no. 2)

And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:²⁷

Consider what it is that singles man out from among created beings, and makes of him a creature apart. Is it not his reasoning power, his intelligence? Shall he not make use of these in his study of religion? I say unto you: weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion.

²⁶ In Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 102, para.107; KMI76.

²⁷ *Paris Talks* 148-9, sec.44, para.18, 12 November 1911.

If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance!

That's why, whenever 'Abdu'l-Bahá set forth, in His Writings or His talks, a concise exposition of the principles taught by Bahá'u'lláh, consistently among the first to be mentioned was the exhortation to free and independent search after truth.²⁸ According to the Bahá'í teachings, this search is the beginning of man's true life and the key to all his attainments. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts all human beings to undertake an independent search for truth, so that they may fulfil their purpose of knowing the truth, and informs them of the criteria and methods they should follow so that the results of their search may be reliable.

At first glance, we may see a contradiction between the advice "weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion" and the constant requests to obey divine law without blinking. For example, Bahá'u'lláh writes (*Tablets* 51, Tajallí):

The second Tajallí [Effulgence] is to remain steadfast in the Cause of God . . . and to be unswerving in His love. And this can in no wise be attained except through full recognition of Him; and full recognition cannot be obtained save by faith in the blessed words: "He doeth whatsoever He willeth."

In reality, the total submission to the Manifestation of God required for a seeker to come to this conclusion is among the goals of the advanced stages of the mystical way, a goal to be pursued and achieved through the use of the instruments that God has given us, including reason. The seeker generally attains this goal step by step through a constant and prolonged process of inner transformation.

The recognition of the Manifestation of God, as incomplete as it may be, is always accompanied by a feeling of attraction toward Him. This attraction depends on two features of the human soul described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "love of transcendence,"²⁹

²⁸ See for example 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 107, sec.70; 248, sec.202; 298, sec.227.

²⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 217, sec.48, para.8.

and “spiritual instinct.”³⁰ Perhaps someone may see an antecedent of these two human traits in the Koranic concept of *fiṭara’-n-nás* (Koran 30:29), translated by Ukrainian Muhammad Asad, born Leopold Weiss (1900-1992) “the natural disposition which God has instilled into man” (Muhammad Asad), and commented upon as:

man’s inborn, intuitive ability to discern between right and wrong, true and false, and, thus, to sense God’s existence and oneness . . . [for,] not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created . . . this is the [purpose of the one] ever-true faith. (*Message*)

In the Bahá’í writings, this nature is compared to “mirrors upon which no dust has fallen.”³¹ It is the human soul, which is intrinsically good because it is the image of God in man. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that human beings are

made in the image of God . . . even as the Torah saith, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness [Genesis 1:26].” This divine image betokeneth all the qualities of perfection whose lights, emanating from the Sun of Truth,³² illumine the realities of men. (*Selections* 140, para.1)

Bahá’u’lláh justifies this human “love of transcendence” by referring to the Muslim myth of the *ruḏ-i-alast* (see Koran 7:172), interpreted by Bausani as

the metahistorical day when God asked all future men whether they recognized Him as their absolute Lord and they pronounced a fateful “yes,” whereby they sealed their deserved condemnation in case of denial. (“Commento” 553n172-174)

In the Bahá’í Scriptures, this myth appears as a fascinating metaphor capable of conveying the various connotations of man’s love of transcendence and spiritual

³⁰ *Paris Talks* 88, sec.29, para.8, 10 November 1911.

³¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 72, para.2, 24 April 1912.

³² Sun of Reality or Truth, a translation of the Arabic-Persian *Shamsu’l-Haqq*, denotes in the Bahá’í writings the Logos, the Word of God.

instinct. The soul remembers that primal day of closeness to God and feels nostalgic for it. Lovers of Persian mystical poetry can re-read the prologue of Rûmî's *Mathnavi*³³ to further deepen their understanding of *rûz-i-alast*.

Because of this inborn attraction and nostalgia, the human heart conceives a deep love toward the Manifestation of God, a love whose essence Bahá'u'lláh describes as follows:

The essence of love is for man to turn his heart to the Beloved One, and sever himself from all else but Him, and desire naught save that which is the desire of his Lord. (*Tablets* 155, Aṣl-i-Kullu'l-Khayr)

It is a process of progressive detachment from the ego and gradual advancement toward the Beloved, until one desires only what the Loved One wants. This is the second stage of Bahá'u'lláh's mystical way, whose components He describes in at least four works, *The Seven Valleys*, *The Four Valleys*, *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, and the fourth Tablet included in *The Call of the Divine Beloved*. It would take too long to go through them all one by one.

These two stations of search and love for the Manifestation of God seem to correspond to what Western mystics call the purgative way. Here too, however, the mystical way as described by Bahá'u'lláh is distinctive. Shoghi Effendi explains, in a letter written on his behalf, that only the Manifestations of God, Who are the Perfect Man, “are truly free of the ‘dross of self’” and that no human being will ever be like Them, “for perfection belongs to a realm we are not destined to enter.”³⁴ However, he adds, “we must constantly mount higher, seek to be more perfect” (*ibid.*). Therefore, the purgative way, which consists of the purification of the soul from all earthly attachments, the ego in the first place, will last for everyone for a lifetime.

³³ Jalál ad-Dín Rûmî (1207-1273), considered by most people as the greatest poet in the Persian language, if not of the whole Islamic world.

³⁴ In *Unfolding* 453, 8 January 1949, to an individual believer.

The lovers-seekers' love for the Manifestation of God urges them to make an effort to draw nearer and nearer to Him. And Bahá'u'lláh explains what they should do to advance toward their Beloved:

Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths. (Kitáb-i-Aqdas 85, para.182)

They that immerse themselves in the ocean of His utterances should at all times have the utmost regard for the divinely-revealed ordinances and prohibitions. Indeed His ordinances constitute the mightiest stronghold for the protection of the world . . . (*Tablets* 51, Tajallí)

The Universal House of Justice has summarized “the essential requisites for our spiritual growth,” as clearly stated in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings and “stressed again and again by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in His talks and Tablets” in a letter written on its behalf:

1. The recital each day of one of the Obligatory Prayers with pure-hearted devotion.
2. The regular reading of the Sacred Scriptures, specifically at least each morning and evening, with reverence, attention and thought.
3. Prayerful meditation on the Teachings, so that we may understand them more deeply, fulfil them more faithfully, and convey them more accurately to others.
4. Striving every day to bring our behaviour more into accordance with the high standards that are set forth in the Teachings.
5. Teaching the Cause of God.
6. Selfless service in the work of the Cause and in the carrying on of our trade or profession.

The House of Justice concludes that these points³⁵ “represent the path towards the attainment of true spirituality that has been laid down by” Bahá’u’lláh.³⁶

In other words, while the seekers read and internalize the content of the divine Revelation and faithfully follow its guidance, they deepen their knowledge of reality and their vision of life. They begin to follow an optimal pattern of behavior. In this way, they live a good life and can get closer and closer to the fulfillment of the three purposes for which they were created as described by Bahá’u’lláh: knowing God,³⁷ worshipping God (see *ibid.*), and carrying “forward an ever-advancing civilization” (*Gleanings* 215, sec.109, para.2). These three purposes are closely interconnected. The knowledge of God, that is, of His Manifestation, nourishes the love for Him in the seekers and this, in its turn, nurtures the desire to draw closer to Him not only in the communion of prayer but also in the effort of becoming acquainted with His Will set forth in His Writings and to conform to it out of His love. Compliance with the divine Will requires exertion to dominate the ego that would sometimes prefer to follow other paths, and this effort involves an inner transformation. The seekers discover in themselves the qualities required to change God’s Scriptures into feelings, thoughts, words, actions, and behaviors, and the qualities they find are mirrors of the divine attributes, a crucial aspect of the image of God engraved in their souls. In this way, step after step, they learn such submission to God as enables them to put their abilities and skills more and more at the service of society. They become one of those people about whom Bahá’u’lláh says:

Wouldst thou seek the grace of the Holy Spirit, enter into fellowship with the righteous, for he . . . even as the true morn doth quicken and illumine the hearts of the dead. (Persian Hidden Words, no. 58)

³⁵ From Ridván 1992 the payment of the Ḥuqúqu’lláh, the Right of God, that is 19 percent of what you can save by living a moderate life (The Universal House of Justice, *Messages*²⁰⁰⁹ 272, sec.129, para.23) and from 28 December 2009 the daily 95 repetitions of Alláh-u-Abhá (*ibid.* 697, sec.315, para.6) have been added to these requirements.

³⁶ *Messages*¹⁹⁹⁶ 589, sec.375, paras. 5-6, 1 September 1983, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Norway.

³⁷ See *Prayers and Meditations* 313, sec. CLXXXI, Short Obligatory Prayer.

This third station, knowledge, after the first two of search and love, closely resembles the illuminative way of traditional mysticism, the path through which the seeker “is enabled to attain a true understanding of created things” (ODWR 468). Bahá’u’lláh writes (*Tablets* 155-6, *Asl-i-Kullu’l-Khayr*):

The essence of understanding is to testify to one’s poverty, and submit to the Will of the Lord . . .

According to Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, the illuminative way also is a process that ends only at the instant of death, because no one will ever “attain a true understanding of created things,” and therefore everyone will always have something to learn. In a letter addressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to a couple who had lost a son “in the flower of his age,” He seems to imply that God keeps us on earth as long as we have something to learn as a result of our “choice of good and evil”³⁸ typical of our earthly life (*Selections* 199-200, sec.169):

The inscrutable divine wisdom underlieth such heart-rending occurrences. It is as if a kind gardener transferreth a fresh and tender shrub from a confined place to a wide open area. This transfer is not the cause of the withering, the lessening or the destruction of that shrub; nay, on the contrary, it maketh it to grow and thrive, acquire freshness and delicacy, become green and bear fruit.

We have thus come at a fourth station of the mystical way, unity, which corresponds more or less to the unitive way of the ancient mystics. ODWR explains that this way implies that “the soul is united with God by love: hence the image of spiritual betrothal and marriage, which itself suggests the indefectible state of cleaving to God characteristic of this way” (1005). The unitive way described in Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings satisfies this definition, but it does not remain restricted within the personal domain. It also embraces the collective sphere. In His Writings, the concept of religion as a mystical way is closely related to the concept of the transformation of both individuals and society. He writes that the object of every religion is

³⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 289, sec.70, para.8.

. . . 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 . . .

And He adds:

. . . if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent. (Kitáb-i-Íqán 240-1, para.270)

Which are the implications of this transformation? For the individual, it implies developing the capacity to express God's Will through feelings, thoughts, words, actions, and behaviors, mirroring God's attributes. These persons become, albeit remotely, similar to God, and thus they are near to Him. "Nearness is likeness," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá.³⁹ They attain the "spiritual betrothal and marriage" (ODWR 1005), in as much as they experience that nearness to God in their lives. And yet they are aware of not being able to completely transcend their own imperfection, because, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained, "he who occupies the degree of servitude, no matter how far he may progress and acquire endless perfections, can never reach the degree of divine Lordship."⁴⁰ In summary, the closest nearness to God is not equivalent to nearness to His unknowable Essence, but simply to nearness to His Attributes, and even this nearness is not identification, but a fulfilment of the destiny of a "creature intended for the reflection of divine virtues."⁴¹ As to the implications of the unitive way as described in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings in the collective sphere, we shall come back to it shortly.

In the Seven Valleys and other mystical works Bahá'u'lláh describes further stages of the mystical way. John S. Hatcher, a poet and Professor Emeritus in English literature at the University of South Florida, suggests that these stages relate "to the ineffable delights of certitude, confirmation and detachment which result from direct

³⁹ *Promulgation* 205, para.2, 26 May 1912.

⁴⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 265-6, sec.62, para.2.

⁴¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 421, para.1, 1 September 1912.

experience of spiritual realities” (*Arc* 71). A discussion of these more advanced stages exceeds the intent of this short presentation.

William C. Chittick, the author of weighty books on Islamic thought and Persian literature, wrote:

So central was shaping character to the Sufi path that Ibn Arabi⁴² could define Sufism as “assuming the character traits of God” (*Sufi Path of Knowledge* 283). God created human beings in His own image, and they accepted to carry the Trust, so it is their duty to actualize the divine character traits that are latent in their souls. (*Sufism* 23)

This concept is surely part of the Bahá’í Faith. But the mystical way as envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh goes a step further. Bausani writes in this regard that Bahá’í mysticism “undoubtedly implies detachment from the world and perfect purification of the individual spirit . . . *but only in view of re-introducing these sanctified individuals into the world of society*, so that the world may be rebuilt and changed into a paradise” (*Saggi* 151). The mystical way as envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh thus departs from the past ones, focused as they were on the development of the individual for purely personal purposes: the attainment of unitive ecstasy. Here the seeker does not pursue her “inner spiritual development” only to satisfy her own “love of transcendence”⁴³ and yield to her “spiritual instinct” (*Paris Talks* 88, sec.29, para.8). She seeks her sanctification because she aims at becoming a servant of humankind, an instrument of civilization, apt at carrying forward a civilization in continuous progress. And so, this mystical way is at the same time preliminary to the creation of a new world order, as it prepares its citizens to create it, and the builder of that order, because those citizens’ efforts to create the new world order are for them the best school in which they may undergo that inner transformation to which they anyway aspire.

⁴² Muḥī ad-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240), named *Shaykhu’l-Akbar* (the greatest master), perhaps the greatest Sufi philosopher and theologian of all time.

⁴³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 217, sec.48, para.8.

Bahá'u'lláh has left to all people who may want to listen to Him a code of ethics of the highest standard to conform to in order to learn, through making an effort to follow that code, to express the divine attributes infused into their souls by their Creator. The Hidden Words (1857–1858), His major ethical work, can be understood as a gift offered by Him to all human beings “that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfill in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue” (Arabic Hidden Words, Prologue). Another significant passage recording the ideal qualities of a truly human being is a letter He addressed to one of His sons which begins with these words: “Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face . . .”⁴⁴ Further guidance may be found in *Gleanings*, a broad selection of passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, compiled and translated by Shoghi Effendi, published in 1935, sec. CXXII-CLXIV, that have been described as expounding “the duties of the individual and the spiritual meaning of life” (Christian xi).

Bahá'u'lláh also left a body of directives, later made explicit by His two successors, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. They describe the elements of a new world order worthy of humanity now very close to its maturity and therefore ready to live under the banner of the oneness of humankind. And He asked His followers to bend all their efforts toward achieving it by seeking and encouraging the collaboration of all human beings who may be willing to work shoulder-to-shoulder with them. His followers perceive this endeavor as an incomparable arena in which it is possible for whosoever descends in it with purity of motives to integrate one’s spiritual apprenticeship.

On 10 February 1980, in a time of intense upsurge in the persecution of the Bahá’is in Iran, the Universal House of Justice reminded expatriate Iranian believers of what they could do in such a difficult time to continue promoting the new world order, quoting a letter, dated 19 December 1923, addressed by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá’is of the East:

⁴⁴ *Epistle* 93-4; see also *Gleanings* 285, sec.130.

Notice the extent to which the friends have been required . . . to be righteous, well-wishing, forbearing, sanctified, pure, detached from all else save God, severed from the trappings of this world and adorned with the mantle of a goodly character and godly attributes.

First and foremost, one should use every possible means to purge one's heart and motives, otherwise, engaging in any form of enterprise would be futile. It is also essential to abstain from hypocrisy and blind imitation, inasmuch as their foul odour is soon detected by every man of understanding and wisdom. Moreover, the friends must observe the specific times for the remembrance of God, meditation, devotion and prayer, as it is highly unlikely, nay impossible, for any enterprise to prosper and develop when deprived of divine bestowals and confirmation. One can hardly imagine what a great influence genuine love, truthfulness and purity of motives exert on the souls of men. But these traits cannot be acquired by any believer unless he makes a daily effort to gain them . . .⁴⁵

This is only a concise attempt to describe what the present speaker has understood of the mystical way as envisioned by Báha'ú'lláh: He is the Perfect Teacher; the rules that the seeker should follow while treading the way are offered in the Bahá'í writings (His Scriptures, the interpretations of His two appointed Interpreters, and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice); the goal to be pursued is one's personal and collective "spiritual development," in view of the creation of His new world order for achieving the oneness of humankind and universal peace. Mysticism, therefore, takes on a different meaning versus the common meanings ascribed to it. It is not an invitation to neglect earthly life, but rather a call to empower it by drawing on those spiritual forces innate in human beings that can vastly improve it.

Around 1258, Rúmn wrote that the Sufi is "the son of the (present) moment (*ibn al-waqt*)" (*Mathnaví* 1:133). His definition has been explained by John Renard, a professor in the Department of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University, Missouri, as

⁴⁵ In *Messages*¹⁹⁹⁶ 436, sec.246, paras.6a-6b.

one who is perfectly attuned to the condition that God has chosen for him or her. The moment, or instant, is thus a kind of intense focused spiritual imperative that requires the individual's complete and undivided attentiveness. (*A to Z* 159)

The present speaker considers this definition as perfectly fitting for Bahá'u'lláh's ideal followers, as He Himself describes them. They try to understand the times in which they live and to do what they understand as vital in that precise instant to advance, together with their neighbors, toward "brotherhood intended in humanity because all are waves of one sea, leaves and fruit of one tree."⁴⁶

What practical expression does the Bahá'í mystical way seem to have taken in our days, according to the present speaker? In October 1985, on the eve of the UN's 1986 International Year of Peace, the Universal House of Justice addressed a message on the subject of peace to the peoples of the world, offering the Bahá'í community as a case study to see how a diverse community was steadily advancing toward the oneness of humankind:

It is a single social organism, representative of the diversity of the human family, conducting its affairs through a system of commonly accepted consultative principles, and cherishing equally all the great outpourings of divine guidance in human history. Its existence is . . . another evidence that humanity can live as one global society, equal to whatever challenges its coming of age may entail. (*Messages*¹⁹⁹⁶ 694, sec.438, para.56)

Since 1985, the Bahá'í community has continued its efforts to give practical application to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, and, in the opinion of the present speaker, the concept of the Bahá'í mystical way has found a very particular expression since the early 2000s when the Universal House of Justice wrote to the Bahá'ís of the world that, in the last years, the culture of the community had significantly changed because of "the system of training institutes established throughout the world."⁴⁷ Last 26 January, professor Holly Hanson, while speaking on the subject "Approaching 200

⁴⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 179, para.1, 19 May 1912.

⁴⁷ *Turning Point* 125, sec.21, para.2, Ridván 2000.

Years: The Value of Comparative History in the Study of the Baha'i Faith," expounded some of the features of this new culture. According to the present speaker, the sequence of courses offered by the training institutes to the community helps those who advance through them to acquire "spiritual virtues and powers," pursue their own "inner spiritual development," and use those virtues to transform society, placing them on a path that the House of Justice illustrates as follows:

a path invites participation, it beckons to new horizons, it demands effort and movement, it accommodates different paces and strides, it is structured and defined. A path can be experienced and known, not only by one or two but by scores upon scores . . . To walk a path is a concept equally expressive. It requires of the individual volition and choice; it calls for a set of skills and abilities but also elicits certain qualities and attitudes; it necessitates a logical progression but admits, when needed, related lines of exploration . . . And crucially, one walks the path in the company of others.⁴⁸

Those who walk this path, Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, are invited to perform some important actions in the pursuit of the three points of the mystical path just mentioned. First of all, they are asked to bend their efforts toward building "vibrant local communities, characterized by tolerance and love," strongly motivated to promote the above mentioned spiritual, moral, and social principles and thus apt at developing and enhancing the capacities of all their components.⁴⁹ In these communities, everyone is ideally encouraged to systematically study the Scriptures in an environment that is trying to be "at once serious and uplifting"; to associate with relatives, friends and acquaintances in devotional meetings opened to everyone, thus nurturing "spiritual susceptibilities" and building communities imbued with the spirit of prayer; to forge bonds of friendship, through frequent reciprocal visits; to intentionally direct their discussions toward "themes of spiritual importance," so that they may deepen their knowledge of the above mentioned principles; everyone is ideally encouraged to establish classes for children in order to steer them in their green years toward paths of learning that may be beneficial for their material, intellectual and spiritual life; to

⁴⁸ *Framework* 139, sec.20, para.4, 12 December 2011.

⁴⁹ See The Universal House of Justice, *Turning Point* 4, sec.1, para.3, 26 December 1995.

assist junior youth to make it through the difficult years of their adolescence and to direct their energies toward the improvement of their societies; everyone is ideally encouraged to become actively involved in social and economic endeavours that address the spiritual and social needs of the cities and towns where they reside.⁵⁰ The Bahá'ís who walk this path are summoned to adopt the Bahá'í Scriptures “as the best provision for . . . [their] journey,”⁵¹ but at the same time they are invited to cooperate for the betterment of society with like-minded people⁵² and to invite each of them to join forces with the Bahá'í communities in learning how to apply those spiritual, moral, and social principles that will contribute to orientate society toward the vital principle of the oneness of humankind.⁵³

In this context, the present speaker deduces from the Bahá'í writings that it is no longer time for esotericism and occultism. It is no longer time for exclusivism. The mystical way set forth by Bahá'u'lláh calls whomsoever may want to listen to His advice to a “divine friendship” which “owes its existence to the breaths of the Holy Spirit” and to a “spiritual brotherhood” which “can be compared to the light.” So “the souls of human beings are like lanterns. The glowing lamps here are many, but there is only one light.”⁵⁴

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⁵⁰ See The Universal House of Justice, *Framework* 61, sec.10, para.1, Ridván 2008.

⁵¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 333, sec.157, para.2.

⁵² See The Universal House of Justice, *Messagges*²⁰⁰⁹ 128, para.8, Ridván 2013.

⁵³ See The Universal House of Justice, October 2019, para.6.

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