

## Obedience Liberation through Love of God in Practice\*

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### Abstract

The history of the Bahá'í Faith includes incidents that have led to the expulsion or resignation of individuals from the religion. These incidents have involved various departures from obedience to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. This article explores the virtue of obedience in light of the Covenant, examining the context in which contemporary secular notions of obedience have arisen and have influenced the attitudes and behavior of Bahá'ís living in the West and articulating a perspective of obedience as liberation.

### Résumé

On retrouve dans l'histoire de la Foi bahá'íe des incidents qui ont entraîné l'expulsion de certaines personnes ou leur renonciation à la religion. Il s'agit d'incidents qui ont en commun divers écarts en ce qui à trait l'obéissance à l'Alliance de Bahá'u'lláh. Le présent article explore la notion d'obéissance selon la perspective de l'Alliance, en examinant le contexte dans lequel notions séculaires contemporaines d'obéissance se sont développées et ont influencé les attitudes et le comportement des Bahá'ís en occident. L'article suggère que l'obéissance est une force libératrice.

### Resumen

La historia de la Fe Bahá'í incluye incidentes que ocasionaron la expulsión o renuncia de individuos otros miembros de la religión. Todos estos incidentes entrañan desviaciones del estado de obediencia al Convenio de Bahá'u'lláh. Este artículo sondea la virtud de obediencia a la luz del Convenio, examinando el marco de referencia dentro del cual han surgido conceptos seglares contemporáneos sobre la obediencia que influyeron sobre modos de pensar y comportamientos de los bahá'ís habitantes del occidente. Da voz al mismo tiempo a una perspectiva de la obediencia como liberación.

O our God! We beg of Thee by the King of Names, and Maker of Heaven and Earth, by the rustling of the leaves of the Tree of Life, and by Thine utterances, through which the realities of things are drawn unto us, to grant that unity in the Love of God may be speedily established throughout the world; that Thou wilt guide us always and unmistakably to whatever Thou wouldst have us to do, and that we may ever be strong and fully prepared to render instant, exact, and complete obedience.

—Bahá'u'lláh

This prayer<sup>1</sup> epitomizes what for Bahá'ís is the essential foundation of their relationship with their Creator: a sincere effort to submit completely to and to do their best to obey the Will of God.

The extensive corpus of the Bahá'í writings contains three documents that are preeminent in articulating and exemplifying the standards of the Covenant which we are called upon by our Creator to obey: Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-'Ahd* [Book of the Covenant] (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh 217–23), the *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, and Shoghi Effendi's February 8, 1934, letter to the Bahá'ís of the West, more commonly known as "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* 97–160). Since 1963, the divinely sanctioned directives from the Universal House of Justice have also guided the worldwide Bahá'í community. Particularly relevant to this discussion are three letters: the Universal House of Justice's 29 December 1988 letter to the Bahá'ís of the United States (i.e., the "Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of

Bahá'u'lláh" letter), its 19 May 1994 letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, and its 2 July 1996 letter to an individual.

It is indicative of the challenges facing the Bahá'í community of the United States that the most eloquent and direct statements on issues such as freedom of the individual, criticism, and the relationship between the individual and Bahá'í institutions have been addressed to that community. Given the secular environment of righteous disobedience that encircles and occasionally influences North American Bahá'ís, such challenges are not surprising, although they are indeed unfortunate, for they retard the progress of that community in rising to the spiritual heights predicted in the Bahá'í writings. This context is informed by a long and diverse history comprising a panoply of ideological forces and momentous events. Asserting that we could not have gotten where we are if our forebears had not rebelled, sociologist Don Mixon claims that we would still "be frozen in some ancient social hierarchy, the lineal descendants of pharaohs, priests and clerks—or, with greater statistical probability, slaves" (*Obedience and Civilization* 13). His conclusion regarding the legacy of that rebellious characteristic in our psyche is: "We who live in late twentieth-century capitalist countries do not much fancy the idea of obeying. We value our independence, autonomy and freedom. When we think of obedience it is likely to be in negative terms. Disobedience attracts us" (13).

This article is a preliminary attempt to address this sentiment in modern society and to reveal how a Bahá'í perspective transforms the concept of obedience from its current image of blind submission to authority, to a virtue that liberates human beings and enables them to achieve their spiritual destiny. The following survey of literature highlights some of the insights into the development of our contemporary secular notion of obedience. Although this survey is by no means complete, it does reveal three general categories of works on obedience, two of which overlap: (1) discussion and critique of the so-called obedience experiments; (2) discussion of various aspects of criminal and civil disobedience, especially Nazi and other war crimes; and (3) Christian theology, especially elaborating on the vow of obedience taken in some Christian orders.

### A Secular Interpretation of Obedience

The secular North American approach to obedience is well articulated by Don Mixon in the preface of his book on the subject:

I assume that most readers endorse what ordinarily are thought of as civilized values, particularly those values so prominent in modern political thought: liberty and equality. I further assume that many readers believe that something is wrong with obeying—that to obey is a sign that a person is not free and equal, is not autonomous. And I assume that many readers believe that they themselves would defy a command that was contrary to civilized values. (*Obedience and Civilization* xv)

Empirical research undertaken by social psychologists has revealed that this belief may be based on misplaced self-confidence and may not be as well founded as we would like to think. To be more precise, the general interpretation of one particular body of empirical research has revealed that many people will obey a command even when doing so violates so-called civilized values. The findings of this body of research are, however, problematic and not necessarily as generalizable as some of its advocates would have us believe. Nevertheless, these problems have not prevented it from being viewed by many scholars as the most important single body of research in time social sciences in this half of the century.

Thirty years ago, social psychologist Stanley Milgram was engaged in what was to become regarded as a notorious and provocative research project at Yale University. Milgram's clinical experiments on obedience were controversial from the start and continue to provoke comment. They are viewed as one of the most acute examples of the use of deception in social science research and indirectly contributed to the establishment of rigid and clear ethical guidelines for conducting research involving human participants. Most people are likely to have at least heard of the Milgram obedience experiments, therefore, a brief summary should suffice.

Setting his research in the context of the heinous acts that were perpetrated during the Nazi regime and the "abhorrent immoral acts carried out by thousands of people in the name of obedience" (Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* 2), Milgram set out to explore how far "ordinary" people might go in a situation designed to create an increasing amount of moral conflict. Participants in the research were instructed to engage in a behavior that inflicted increasing levels of pain on another human being.<sup>2</sup> The goal of the study was to find out when and how people would defy the authority of the experimenter in the face of a clear moral dilemma. The results of the experiment were, in Milgram's words, "both surprising and dismay.... It is the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority that constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation" (*Obedience to Authority* 5). Up to two-thirds of the participants in the

experiments were found to be “obedient,” i.e., they willingly inflicted pain on another human being at the command of an authority figure, despite their obvious distress over doing so.

Milgram concluded that under certain circumstances, we human beings can abandon our humanity by merging our “unique personality into larger institutional structures.” He continued:

This is a fatal flaw nature has designed into us, and which in the long run gives our species only a modest chance of survival. It is ironic that the virtues of loyalty, discipline, and self-sacrifice that we value so highly in the individual are the very properties that create destructive organizational engines of war and bind men to malevolent systems of authority. Each individual possesses a conscience which to a greater or lesser degree serves to restrain the unimpeded flow of impulses destructive to others. But when he merges his person into an organizational structure, a new creature replaces autonomous man, unhindered by the limitations of individual morality, freed of humane inhibition, mindful only of the sanctions of authority. (*Obedience to Authority* 188)

After listing the procedures he and subsequent researchers introduced into the original experiment methodology to determine the exact boundaries on the limits to that kind of obedience, Milgram summarized his conclusion with the following words:

The results, as seen and felt in the laboratory, are to this author disturbing. They raise the possibility that human nature, or—more specifically—the kind of character produced in American democratic society, cannot be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority. (189)

Milgram concluded his book by quoting political scientist Harold J. Laski from an article entitled “The Dangers of Obedience” published in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* in 1929:

...civilization means, above all, an unwillingness to inflict unnecessary pain. Within the ambit of that definition, those of us who heedlessly accept the commands of authority cannot yet claim to be civilized men.

Our business, if we desire to live a life not utterly devoid of meaning and significance, is to accept nothing which contradicts our basic experience merely because it comes to us from tradition or convention or authority. It may well be that we shall be wrong; but our self-expression is thwarted at the root unless the certainties we are asked to accept coincide with the certainties we experience. That is why the condition of freedom in any state is always a widespread and consistent skepticism of the canons upon which power insists. (Laski, as quoted by Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* 189)

Set in the context of Milgram’s provocative research and the theory he developed to explain his findings, this statement represents a solid endorsement and, indeed, prophetic prediction of Milgram’s conclusions. However, unless they go back to the original publication of Laski’s article, readers miss his own conclusion, which follows the extract cited above:

Nothing can ever entitle us, as free spiritual beings, to merge our lives into the common life, to disown our personality, and accept standards which, within ourselves, we know to be worthless. A healthy loyalty is not passive and complacent, but active and critical.... For all obedience that has the right to regard itself as ethical is built upon a conscious agreement with the purpose we encounter. Anything else is a betrayal of ourselves; and when we surrender the truth we see, by that betrayal we betray also the future of civilization. For the triumphs of a free conscience are the landmarks on the road to the ideal, (Laski, “Dangers of Obedience” 10)

As will be shown below, the active engagement of our inner conscience with the forces around us is a critical component in a Bahá’í perspective of obedience. Milgram’s research experience seems to have blinded him to that possibility, reducing his view of human beings to inherently flawed, amoral automatons who do not possess enough free will to resist a malevolent force. His conclusions ignore the potential of each human being to be a free and active agent, a theme that will be explored further below. His conclusions also ignore the coercive components of malevolent regimes and even experimental research situations.

Many researchers have challenged Milgram's experiments and his conclusions both on methodological and ethical grounds. Despite these critiques and the problems they address, "many students of the Holocaust have, with unbounded confidence and passion, embraced the obedience experiments. Milgram's research has been seen as containing profound insights regarding human nature, in particular the propensity of human beings to fail significant tests of conscience and moral decision making" (Miller, *Obedience Experiments* 180). However, Miller acknowledges the mixed reception and interpretation, citing the inherent emotionality of the Holocaust itself as a contributing factor in the impassioned embracing of Milgram's conclusions.<sup>3</sup> In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Erich Fromm argued against the generalizability of Milgram's findings:

I do not think this experiment permits any conclusion with regard to most situations in real life. The psychologist was not only an authority to whom one owes obedience, but a representative of Science and one of the most prestigious institutions of higher education in the United States. Considering that science is widely regarded as the highest value in contemporary industrial society, it is very difficult for the average person to believe that what science commands could be wrong or immoral. If the Lord had not told Abraham not to kill his son, Abraham would have done it, like millions of parents who practiced child sacrifice in history. For the believer neither God nor his modern equivalent, Science, can command anything that is wrong. (51; quoted in Miller, *Obedience Experiments* 214)

I would suggest that for the *unthinking* believer, this is very true, especially in those situations where a person believes God has told him or her to kill. However, as I hope to make clear by the end of this article, a Bahá'í perspective on obedience does not include passive and unthinking compliance within its vision. The Bahá'í perspective notwithstanding, human history is replete with incidents of apparently blind submission to an authority figure, and an analysis of the concept of obedience would be incomplete without an overview of some of the literature that has explored this phenomenon.

One of the most interesting contributions to this literature is an anthology of essays published partly in response to the disclosure of the background leading to what is commonly known as "The Jonestown Massacre," in which Jim Jones, the leader of a cult called the People's Temple, led his followers to mass suicide in Guyana in 1978. In his opening essay in this anthology, editor Max Rosenbaum reveals the fundamental component in such incidents of obedience:

The extraordinary degree of psychological submission such leaders as Rev. Jones and Adolf Hitler received from followers had to do with a promise of transcendence that they offered their disciples. A disciple who attaches himself to such a leader—to a simple, all-clarifying (that is, totalistic) theology—is able to feel a part of something larger than himself. He feels a part of something that will never die and will never permit him to die. ("Compliance" 26)

In another essay from the same hook, referring to the same phenomenon, psychiatrist Raymond Battegay writes:

Absolute obedience, as we have seen in the Manson "family" or in the Temple sect of Rev. Jones in Guyana—due to a total narcissistic fusion of the participants with the leader and of the leader with the members—leads to the danger that the life of ethics, or of the members, or both are threatened. In their dependence and obedience to the leader, they experience him as omnipotent and omniscient, attribute to him and in this way to themselves more right than other men, and easily fall into criminality. ("Compliance?" 101)

In both discussions, we find a pattern in the relationship between the leader and the followers and the context of the acts of obedience. One contemporary term for this relationship is "co-dependency." Regardless of the label, the context in which the obedience is enacted is one based on a narcissistic and charismatic personality exerting a forceful will upon people who have developed an allegiance based on, in their minds at least, real demonstrations of omniscience, omnipotence, and promises of transcendence, all of which are components of traditional religious systems. This relationship, identified by another scholar as "unhealthy compliance," includes the notion that the leader replaces social institutions as the authority figure in the lives of the followers (Braun, "Healthy Side" 142). The people who are attracted to these situations have become alienated from the values of mainstream society, either as those values are expressed by the traditional churches or the secular values disseminated through popular culture and our social institutions. These people hunger for meaning in their lives and find it in allegiance to a figure who commands respect and adulation.

A cursory and cynical interpretation of obedience and compliance literature—and Milgram's work and findings in particular, especially in light of his placing his own work in the context of the atrocities enacted in the Nazi death camps might lead one to the erroneous conclusion that obedience to authority has a direct causal connection with blind submission and immoral acts. This is certainly the impression conveyed in contemporary North American society where memories of the Holocaust and other human atrocities are still fresh and have a profound impact on the current abandonment of obedience as a virtue. As the generation that lived during the Holocaust ages, younger generations witness or take part in contemporary events that reinforce a cynical view of the behavior human beings are capable of when they are obedient to authority. The Vietnam War still casts a shadow over the American psyche in its contemporary distrust of obedience.

It is clear that scholars and commentators who adopt a secular approach to developing an understanding of the concept of obedience have a great deal of evidence to support a cynical and skeptical view of its value in human life. However, as mentioned above, many people today are seeking answers to profound existential questions and are seeking meaning in lives that are beset by the influences of a culture that seems unable to attend to their spiritual needs. Religion, of course, has been the traditional source of knowledge and inspiration regarding such matters, and, as the predominant religion of North American culture, one would expect Christianity to address this issue, as indeed it does.

### **The Christian Vow of Obedience in a Secular World**

There are dozens of volumes written by Christian scholars that are devoted to an exploration of the concept of obedience in a Christian context. It has been impossible for me to survey all of them for a work of this length. I have limited myself to a few that were easily accessible, but readers should be aware that this survey is very preliminary and constitutes only the most cursory analysis of the literature.

In *Free to Love*, Francis J. Moloney refers to obedience as “the Gospel imperative which encompasses all Gospel values” (61). Moloney sets his analysis of obedience in the context of its inclusion as one of three imperatives (with poverty and chastity) “arising from the heart of the biblical message” (*Free to Love* 1). He roots his discussion in the standard set by Jesus Christ in terms of his relationship with God and his “perfect obedience”:

Jesus’ sinlessness did not arise from his being some sort of angelic being, but from his radical and never-failing obedience. We sometimes hear it said that the newer christologies have their value in showing that Jesus was human like us. That is not quite correct, as in his perfect obedience and his preparedness to go further and further away from himself in faith, hope and love, in his freedom to accept a future which God would create, Jesus alone was the perfect human being. He has made sense out of humanity, while we, in our sinfulness, egoism and selfishness, are always less than human. What is needed is that we become more and more human as we move closer and closer to the quality of the life of love and obedience of Jesus of Nazareth.... (Moloney, *Free to Love* 83)

This grounding of the concept in the life of the Prophet is echoed by TULLO GOFFI, who describes “obedience in the spirit of faith” as an “imitation of Jesus’ obedience,” citing three biblical passages (John 8:29; Heb .5:8, Phil. 2:8). However, Goffi goes one step further, stating that “Christ’s obedience has an aspect which we cannot imitate. Jesus was obedient through immediate contact with his Father, whereas our obedience must always be through the intermediary of a human person in authority” (“Deviations from Christian Obedience” 5). This reinforcement of the role of the clergy in the Christian community reveals one of the challenges faced by Christian leaders today. The traditional Christian churches are structured and interpretations of biblical teachings are expressed in ways that require individuals to channel their devotion through a human intermediary rather than directly to the Prophet or the Creator. Whereas parishioners are exhorted to surround their lives with the love of Christ and to make Christ the focus of their existence, many theologians reinforce the traditional hierarchical structure, especially evident in Catholicism, that confers absolution through a human being rather than directly from God.

Other Christian scholars recognize the multiple dimensions of a life of faith, emphasizing various facets of obedience so as not to reduce it to “the mere acceptance of totalitarian control” (Duquoc and Floristan, *Christian Obedience* x). The editors of a volume devoted to the subject articulate these facets as follows: (1) obedience is a “human act” made by a person who possesses “personal autonomy, full knowledge, freedom and responsibility”; (2) obedience is a communal act in which the person obeys as more than a mere subject, but rather as a member of a Christian community; (3) obedience is the practice of faith, i.e., obedience to God; (4) obedience can be a “fraternal correction,” to handle any tensions between norms and spiritual inspiration; and (5) “Christian obedience is not merely a passive virtue exercised by subordinates towards those who govern. The objective of Christian obedience is not personal sanctification but the enriching of Christian life within society. Christian obedience is an active virtue

because it requires the fidelity of all Christians to the demands of the Spirit of Jesus” (*Christian Obedience* x). These five dimensions or facets of obedience are integrated into one ideal relationship between the individual and the Church as the earthly embodiment of the spirit of Christ.

However, this vision of the ideal Christian expression of obedience is complicated by the contemporary views of those who feel a sense of internal conflict in the context of divided loyalties to their faith and to the norms of secular society. Scholars and church leaders recognize that practicing Christians are torn between commitment to their religious community and to their own self-assurance, self-reliance, and personal liberty, concepts which take the guise of virtues in a secular system.<sup>5</sup> This dilemma is resolved for many people by surrendering to the decisions of an authority figure (de Locht, “Freedom of Obedience” 35). However, others find and adopt a form of loyalty that is more complex:

After inquiring into personal values of self-denial, humble submission, and renunciation of one’s own right of judgment, they come to ask whether the demands of the search for truth, the situation of the individuals in question, and the good of the institution do not require that they should continue to say what they think is true. Is it possible for those who do not or do not any longer agree with the official teaching on this or that particular point to remain silent, when real human situations are in question..? (de Locht, “Freedom of Obedience” 35)

For some people, de Locht continues, “loyal contestation, far from being a lack of commitment or an indication of disloyalty, becomes a constitutive element of obedience” (37).

Thus, the Christian Church finds itself in a challenging and likely unresolvable dilemma. On the one hand, there is a divine standard to uphold, originally embodied in the person of Jesus Christ and by which human beings express obedience to their Creator by trying to follow Christ’s example. On the other hand, individuals representing institutions that have been developed to constitute the structure of the church are in a position of having to deal with challenges to the doctrines of their faith in a social environment the founders of those institutions could never have foreseen. Contemporary theologians and Christian leaders are faced with the challenging task of attempting to address proactively two fundamental aspects of human life that seem to be on a collision course: the compelling force of a divinely ordained virtue in the context of a contemporary secular environment composed of dissent and distrust of the institutions of old. To avoid the charge of blind faith, believers are required to adapt to and adopt the prevailing social agenda and values, even if those values conflict with the doctrine of their chosen faith. To remain loyal to their church, they have three options: (1) suppress their acceptance of the secular values surrounding them, (2) justify their efforts to change the doctrine they disagree with, or (3) rationalize some combination of the other two. Is it any wonder that former Christians are finding solace and meaning in alternative religious that accommodate the secular values of the day? By finding such a “tolerant” and “politically correct” religious community to which they can attach their allegiance, especially those that do not denigrate the Prophets of the traditional religions, these people can “have their cake and eat it, too.” By accommodating their values to a belief system that requires a minimum of compromise between divine and secular standards, they create for themselves a reconciliation between two conflicting forces. Others go even further by rejecting any form of formalized religion altogether and adopting a “freelance” approach to spirituality in which they pick and choose whatever “feels right” to them.

What of the traditional churches? They are caught between rigorous adherence to what they perceive as divine standards as revealed in the Bible and the need to ensure that their doctrine remains relevant in a rapidly changing society, which includes increasing numbers of parishioners who challenge the authority of the church, taking greater responsibility by their own spiritual development, rather than basing it exclusively on the dictates of the clergy.

Is there a resolution to these tensions, these challenges, these conflicts? The next section offers insights from a number of sources into ways that we can begin to return to the divine standard espoused in the Bible and enacted in many Christian orders as a vow of obedience and which is most powerfully articulated in the Bahá’í writings as the concept of obedience to the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh.

### **“Obedience is Worship”**

This simple three-word sentence epitomizes what, for many people of faith, regardless of the religion to which they subscribe, is the essence of their relationship with their Creator, a relationship which is probably most fully understood by Bahá’ís, if only because of the wealth of guidance that has been revealed in the core texts of the Bahá’í Faith. However, this sentence was written in 1852 by someone who was not directly influenced by the Bahá’í Faith, although he certainly seems to have been attuned to the spirit of the Bahá’í Revelation, as were so many other

artists and thinkers of his generation. Ralph Waldo Emerson also wrote: “By contenting ourselves with obedience, we become divine. Belief and love—a believing love will relieve us of a vast load of care” (quoted in Lange, *Riddle of Liberty* 115). Among Emerson’s writings, we also find: “Obedience is the eye which reads the laws of the Universe” (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* 268; quoted in Lange, *Riddle of Liberty* 101). In her analysis of Emerson’s writings on the subject, Lou Ann Lange writes that Emerson viewed obedience as “a simple transfer of trust from personal whim to absolute law” (*Riddle of Liberty* 114). “When men accepted the fact that their lives had a purpose inseparable from and indispensable to the design of the Universe, Emerson attested, they would find ‘pleasure and honor in obeying’” (Lange, *Riddle of Liberty* 111–12).

As akin as these expressions may be to those contained in the Bahá’í writings, they comprise just one component of a complex belief system called “transcendentalism” that Emerson espoused and upon which he expounded at great length. Despite his reverence for the divine and longing for a great teacher who would reveal to humanity the hidden mysteries of the world, Emerson was often harshly critical of institutionalized religion, especially Christianity, describing the application of an ethic based on the adoption of Christlike behavior as, in his words, “flat idolatry” (Lange, *Riddle of Liberty* 109–10; Emerson, *Early Lectures* 96). This critique of traditional religion was one part of a recurring tension in his life and writings between patterning oneself after a noble ideal and following the promptings of one’s own moral nature.

Emerson’s perspective was based on the view that, freed from the constraints that society imposed on them, human beings could and should recapture the liberty associated with obedience to “absolute law,” a law which applies equally to all. In this context, obedience is tantamount to an abandonment of oneself to universal or moral ends.<sup>7</sup> Human beings often pursue their own private interests and, in Emerson’s opinion, this pursuit compromises the good of the whole. He was adamant in his insistence that human beings were exceeding the limits of their mandate to govern themselves, each other, and the rest of creation, and would only find release in an acceptance of limits. Upon achieving that release, they would become more complete and integrated as individuals, liberated from the impositions of human institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Although Emerson’s exhortations to obedience were aimed primarily at convincing each man that he was ultimately responsible for bringing order and purpose to his own life, he never supposed that the freedom and power which self-trust promised would be sufficient to meet all of man’s needs. If the point of obedience was to help man reclaim the symmetry or equilibrium which he once enjoyed and which continued to characterize all of nature, true freedom and power, Emerson knew, would have to be exercised within a moral context or whole.... Unlike the rest of nature, Emerson argued, men did not obey willingly. Rather they paid unwilling tribute to governments and laws founded on force. (Lange, *Riddle of Liberty* 116)

Emerson has been dismissed by many scholars as a naïve idealist with too much faith in human nature and benevolent law. However, despite his conclusions regarding the importance of individual sovereignty and an ideal society being relatively anarchic in *form*, he viewed that society as necessarily being theocratic in *substance*. Essentially, at the same time that Bahá’u’lláh was in prison and exile on one continent, Emerson was living on another, longing for a divine representative on Earth who would instruct humanity in the laws of the universe and guide us towards the highest form of self-expression he could imagine: “obedience as worship.”

### **Rendering Instant, Exact, and Complete Obedience**

At the foundation of the core Covenant documents mentioned at the beginning of this article and, indeed, implicit in all the Bahá’í writings is one essential concept: love of God and obedience to divine laws.<sup>9</sup> Although this might seem like two concepts, they are so intertwined as to be virtually indistinguishable from one another when viewed from a Bahá’í perspective. Indeed, the “twin duties” of recognition of the Manifestation and obedience to the divine ordinances are described by Bahá’u’lláh in the first passage of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* as “inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other” (19). Implicit in the recognition of the Manifestation is the compelling divine command expressed when God speaks in three sequential *Hidden Words*:

O SON OF MAN!

Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.

O SON OF MAN!

I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life.

#### O SON OF BEING!

Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 4)

Thus, love and recognition go hand-in-hand, and obedience is both the next step following recognition of the Manifestation and the obligation of every sincere believer in his or her spiritual development. Another way to view this relationship of love, recognition, and obedience is as self-conscious and voluntary submission to the Will of God.

An essential component of a Bahá'í understanding and application of obedience is this self-conscious awareness that one obeys because one chooses to do so. There is no reason for blind faith here. This perspective is eloquently expressed by J. E. Esslemont:

Devotion to God involves implicit obedience to His revealed Commands even when the reason for these Commands is not understood. The sailor implicitly obeys his captain's orders, even when he does not know the reason for them, but his acceptance of authority is not blind. He knows full well that the captain has served a thorough probation, and given ample proofs of competence as a navigator. Were it not so, he would be foolish indeed to serve under him. So the Bahá'í must implicitly obey the Captain of his Salvation, but he will be foolish indeed if he has not first ascertained that this Captain has given ample proofs of trustworthiness. Having received such proofs, however, to refuse obedience would be even greater folly, for only by intelligent and open-eyed obedience to the wise master can we reap the benefits of his wisdom, and acquire this wisdom for ourselves. (*Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* 77–78)

Esslemont expresses in one succinct paragraph the key elements of a Bahá'í approach to obedience. However, it is essential to explore the context in which this obedience occurs. The following section begins that exploration by sketching in very broad strokes the significance of the Bahá'í Covenant.<sup>10</sup> This brief overview of the Covenant's significance in the lives of Bahá'ís will lay the foundation for my concluding section, which offers a preliminary overview of the defining virtue in each Bahá'í's relationship with that Covenant and with our Creator.

#### *The Significance of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*

Bahá'ís living during this century are the builders of the foundation of a new civilization, basing their endeavors on the teachings of the central figures of their religion and following the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. They are engaged in this effort in an environment in which the religious institutions of the past are crumbling, often in disgrace, in which religion in general is viewed by many people with suspicion and distrust, and in which organized religion in particular is perceived as yet another form of institutional autocracy and oppression. Given humanity's record of errors in interpreting and implementing the Word of God, who can blame the suspicious and cynical for their views? Why should anyone living today, especially in North America, look to religion, and in particular a new religion that has emerged from the war-torn Middle East for answers to the problems of the world? Why should this new religion be viewed any differently than the others? How is it different from the religions of the past?

In many respects, the Bahá'í Faith is no different from previous revelations. Shoghi Effendi has described the Bahá'í Revelation as the "culmination of a prophetic cycle and the fulfillment of the promise of all ages," which "admits and establishes as its firmest and ultimate basis" "those first and everlasting principles that animate and underlie the religions that have preceded it." However, the Bahá'í Revelation is far more than previous dispensations. According to Shoghi Effendi, "its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to coördinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations" (*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 114). Moreover, for the first time in history, humanity has been granted a foolproof system of safeguards to protect us from the contaminations that have distorted and corrupted the religions of the past. "Alone of all the Revelations gone before it this Faith has, through the explicit directions, the repeated warnings, the authenticated safeguards incorporated and elaborated in its teachings, succeeded in raising a structure which the bewildered followers of bankrupt and broken creeds might well approach and critically examine, and seek, ere it is too late, the invulnerable security of its world embracing shelter" (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 146).

In referring to this Covenant, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “So firm and mighty is this Covenant that from the beginning of time until the present day no religious Dispensation hath produced its like” (*World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 146).

This Covenant, outlined by Bahá’u’lláh initially in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, which contains his appointment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as its center, was reinforced in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament, in which the framework for the establishment of the Bahá’í Administrative Order was outlined. Shoghi Effendi, appointed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, in his unsurpassed visionary and eloquent fashion, created the massive corpus of writings to which Bahá’ís can turn for interpretation of Bahá’u’lláh’s and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings. The Bahá’í writings in general, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s and Shoghi Effendi’s writings in particular, provide us with the blueprint for establishing the ever-advancing civilization prophesied by Bahá’u’lláh, and the Universal House of Justice bases each of its ongoing series of global plans on that blueprint. The outlines of the Administrative Order, existing only *in potentia* in the early years of this century, are now seen emerging in their fullness, as national Bahá’í communities around the world become stronger and more firmly established and as local communities take on increasingly audacious plans of action. As the Bahá’í community grows and develops, the international scope of the Bahá’í Faith emerges and fulfills the prophecies of its central figures.

Among the challenges faced by the Bahá’í community today is that associated with building the international foundation of institutions that will one day be models for governance as world political leaders and those they govern seek effective alternatives to the prevailing defective system. However, the Bahá’í writings and recent messages from the Universal House of Justice make it clear that progress in the development of these institutions does not occur in a vacuum and that, especially in North America, there are counterproductive forces to be overcome. The guidance from the Universal House of Justice emphasizes one concept above all others: unity.<sup>11</sup> On this subject, it has written:

Also relevant to effecting unity is the attitude of the friends, whether serving on any Assembly or not, toward the exercise of authority in the Bahá’í community. People generally tend to be suspicious of those in authority. The reason is not difficult to understand, since human history is replete with examples of the disastrous misuse of authority and power. A reversal of this tendency is not easily achievable, but the Bahá’í friends must be freed of suspicion toward their institutions if the wheels of progress are to turn with uninterrupted speed. (19 May 1994 letter) (*The American Bahá’í* 3A)

Later in the same letter, the Universal House of Justice quotes Shoghi Effendi:

The friends must never mistake the Bahá’í administration for an end in itself. It is merely the instrument of the spirit of the Faith. This Cause is a Cause which God has revealed to humanity as a whole. It is designed to benefit the entire human race, and the only way it can do this is to reform the community life of mankind, as well as seeking to regenerate the individual. (*The American Bahá’í* 3A)

And again in the same letter, Shoghi Effendi is quoted:

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote to the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá’í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand and fellowship, candor and courage on the other. (*The American Bahá’í* 3A)

Thus, the standards of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh call Bahá’ís to transcend the norms and values of the society that surrounds them and to strive to adhere to a far more noble goal. Shoghi Effendi reveals the components of the balancing act in which Bahá’ís engage in their efforts both individually and collectively to serve the Covenant in whatever way they are inspired and called. Among those components are the balance between freedom and submission and the rights of the individual and self-surrender, all of which underlie the concept of obedience.

#### *Love and Obedience*

The most essential foundation of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh, the most compelling Truth of divine revelation, is the love that our Creator holds for us and the rest of Creation. As revealed in the *Hidden Words* quoted above, we find one divine Command (to love our Creator) and three divine Truths: (1) God loves us; (2) because of that love we have been created. The command takes us to the third truth: (3) if we do not love our Creator, the love our Creator feels for us cannot reach us. The love still exists, but we cannot feel its effects. It is like a fire burning on a cold

night. If we stand far away from it, we can see it burning but cannot feel its effects. If we approach it, we are bathed in its warmth, we are protected from the cold. In another Hidden Word, we read:

O SON OF BEING!

My love is My stronghold; he that entereth therein is safe and secure, and he that turneth away shall surely stray and perish. (5)

When we turn away from the fire, we deliberately remove ourselves from its warmth and protection, exposing ourselves to the coldness of the world. Likewise, when we turn away from God, we are turning away from the safety and protection afforded by faith in that love, that undying and eternal love, that all-encompassing love that supersedes and transcends any other that we may experience on this earthly plane.<sup>12</sup> Although that love may be perceived as an ephemeral concept, beyond the reach of our comprehension, it is, in fact, the most dependable phenomenon in the universe. The familiar aspects of our daily lives are transient; even the conditions of our planet and the solar system are subject to change and evolution. There are really only two constants in the universe: (1) God is and (2) God is love.

If we recognize these truths and follow the divine guidance we are given, we can equip ourselves with the tools necessary to deal with the challenges we face as we engage in our spiritual development and strive to achieve our potential. Beyond our response to the divine command to love our Creator, we must arm ourselves with faith, knowledge, humility, trust, patience, detachment, and steadfastness. These tools will assist us to combat the onslaught of self-doubt, uncertainty, confusion, ignorance, arrogance, and hubris. Faith in our belief in God and the divine teachings; knowledge of the veracity of those teachings; humility in our awareness of our station in relation to that of our Creator; trust in ourselves and the divinely guided institutions that implement the Bahá'í Administrative Order; patience during times when our own agenda does not coincide with the divine one; detachment from the material aspects of this life, the dominant values of the society that surrounds us, and the dictates of our own wills when they seem at variance with God's Will; and steadfastness in our service to our Creator and the rest of humanity—all are essential in our ongoing application of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in our daily lives. Only when we lose sight of these virtues and fail to practice them do we run the risk of committing the most grievous and foolhardy of errors: challenging the divine order by asserting our own views or attempting to revise or adapt divine teachings to the standards of the mainstream society.

As human beings living in this material state, we need concrete ways in which we can apply and express the virtues described above, all of which are components of the concept that is the focus of this article. The most concrete way in which we can manifest our love for our Creator and the Manifestation of God for this day is to offer instant, exact, and complete obedience to the divine teachings. This is the foundation of our part in Bahá'u'lláh's Lesser Covenant, the contract with humanity for this era in our evolution, the body of laws and teachings that enable us to build that "ever-advancing civilization" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 215), the framework for establishing "the Kingdom of God on Earth" (*Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 1). Bahá'u'lláh tells us that obedience to these laws constitutes the ultimate in liberation:

True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things. Say: The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth. Whoso hath tasted of its sweetness will refuse to barter it for all the dominion of earth and heaven. (*Gleanings* 336)

This passage seems to say that submission to the Will of God is the source of liberation and that obedience to an authority outside oneself is the key to freedom. Such ideas are anathema to those caught up in the current climate of Western individualism. They stand in sharp contrast to the ethic of righteous disobedience, one of the hallmarks of twentieth-century Western civilization, especially when that civilization is viewed in the context of two world wars and the corruption of secular and religious institutions. The horrors enacted by those who have obeyed authority figures and in the name of God seem to be compelling evidence to support the view that individual self-actualization, independent thought, and freedom must be upheld as preeminent values in a civilized society. Interestingly, even a cursory reading of Bahá'u'lláh's writings in this area, especially his letters to the rulers of the nineteenth century, reveals that such notions are, in fact, inherent in the Bahá'í teachings. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice reiterates this point in the "Individual Rights and Freedoms" letter, identifying the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh as the

catalyst for “[t]he spirit of liberty which in recent decades has swept over the planet with such tempestuous force” (21) and reminding us of the balancing principle at the heart of the Bahá’í teachings: moderation.

Bahá’u’lláh was explicit in his warnings regarding the consequences of a less-than-moderate exercise of liberty in human affairs:

We find some men desiring liberty, and priding themselves therein. Such men are in the depths of ignorance.

Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench.... That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief-maker. Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness. (*Gleanings* 335–36)

The exercise of liberty in modern secular society has certainly exceeded the limits of moderation. By pursuing this principle without a clear vision of the limits that must necessarily be imposed on it to ensure that justice prevails, Western society has created a climate in which the rights of the individual often take precedence over the good of the community. Disobedience on an individual level is promoted as a necessary antidote to the exercise of authority by what are perceived as corrupt and misguided institutions and is recognized as an indicator of individual freedom and self-actualization. This climate contributes to the prevailing atmosphere of moral relativism, in which promotion of any overarching system of universal values is replaced by tolerance of as many ethics or systems of ethics as are necessary to ensure that each individual’s notion of rights and values is recognized. The inevitable outcome of such a trend is a society in which “anything goes.” It is no wonder, then, that over a half-century ago, Shoghi Effendi cautioned Bahá’ís to detach themselves from the overarching ethics of the time:

I cannot refrain from appealing to them who stand identified with the [Bahá’í] Faith to disregard the prevailing notions and the fleeting fashions of the day, and to realize as never before that the exploded theories and the tottering institutions of present-day civilization must needs appear in sharp contrast with those God-given institutions which are destined to arise upon their ruin. I pray that they may realize with all their heart and soul the ineffable glory of their calling, the overwhelming responsibility of their mission, and the astounding immensity of their task. (*World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 16–17)

The Universal House of Justice reinforces this warning and exhortation in the Ridván 153 message to the Bahá’ís of North America:

Now as never before should you strive mightily to free yourselves from the obstacles of apathy, attachment to worldly pursuits, and lethargy, which stand in the way of so glorious a realization.... The whole of North America stands in desperate need of the inspiring vision, the dynamic sense of purpose and the idealism, which can be provided only by those who are imbued with the spirit and truths of the Bahá’í Writings. (*Bahá’í Canada* 9)

In its 19 May 1994 letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, the Universal House of Justice also clearly identified the path that must be followed by Bahá’ís as they strive to achieve the lofty vision of the Bahá’í Revelation and to pass the tests they are destined to face:

It is also vital for your Assembly to keep in mind that *the mental anguish which the prevailing situation induces can and must be overcome through prayer and a conscious attention to teaching the Cause and living the Bahá’í life with a world-embracing vision....* Undoubtedly, the highly esteemed American believers... know quite well that they must now seize their chance at this critical time to prove their own capacity to endure that living sacrifice which ... is required of them [if they are to fulfil the glorious destiny forecast for them] in the scriptures of our Faith. May they be granted the celestial strength to pass, over and over again, the mental tests which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá promised He would send to them to purify them, thus enabling them to achieve their divinely conferred potential as a force for change in the world. (Emphasis added) (*The American Bahá’í* 1A)

The message is clear. The divine standard supersedes all else. Bahá’u’lláh wrote:

Say: O leaders of religion! Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it. (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶ 99)

The only path to true liberty lies in submission to the Will of God and obedience to the divine teachings. Bahá'u'lláh's mission is to release humanity from the antiquated notions of past centuries and to raise the standard of human behavior and development to a new and unprecedented level. If we allow ourselves to be influenced by the prevailing secular standards, measuring with a flawed and outdated gauge the Bahá'í Administrative Order as it is enacted by the international, national, and local institutions, we still lose sight of the animating spirit of those institutions and the purpose of their existence: the establishment of the unification of humankind.

It is not surprising that the Bahá'ís of North America, especially those living in the United States, have received such an abundance of writings devoted to this subject. We are living in a climate that embodies many notions that are in conflict with the Bahá'í vision and that are among the most challenging tests Bahá'ís anywhere in the world face at this time. Whereas Bahá'ís in Iran have sacrificed their very lives for the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís in the West have a very different, albeit no less crucial, challenge; this challenge also involves sacrifice. It involves the perspective of *obedience* as sacrifice—obeying even when one does not want to do so. Such a spiritual attitude brings, we are told, greater rewards than obedience easily offered, Bahá'ís are called upon to transcend the climate of righteous disobedience in the secular world around them and obey the guidance of Bahá'í institutions even when they disagree with it. Their submission to the authority of those institutions based on their love of Bahá'u'lláh, reinforces the animating spirit of the Administrative Order as the framework for Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant with humanity.

The situation currently being faced by the North American Bahá'í community contributes to the ongoing spiritual education of the entire world. Challenges to the authority of the institutions provide the context for the issuance by the Universal House of Justice of some of its most powerfully worded statements and messages. These situations stimulate the effusions of the divine authority of the Bahá'í Faith's most supreme and, Bahá'ís believe, the world's only infallible institution. The wisdom contained in those messages reinforces in a contemporary context the statements issued throughout the first century of the Bahá'í Faith by its central figures and provides humanity with concrete and explicit guidance on how to deal with the challenges we all face as we struggle with the birthpangs of a new world order in these closing years of the millennium.

## Notes

1. In recent years, as researchers at the Bahá'í World Centre have been unable to locate or authenticate the original texts for prayers and tablets widely distributed in the early years of the Bahá'í Faith, such material has been deleted from new editions of Bahá'í prayer books and other authorized publications. This prayer falls into that category. It can only be found in out-of-print editions of English-language prayer books.

2. Subjects in the experiment played the role of a “teacher” who was instructed by the experimenter to “punish” the “student” if he (the “student” used in these early experiments was always male) failed to learn the task correctly. The form of “punishment” was electric shock, inflicted by the “teacher” and which intensified as the experiment progressed. For a thorough discussion of the methodology, the purpose of the research, and the theoretical explanation for the findings, see Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*.

3. Interested readers will find a comprehensive summary of the analysis and critique of the obedience experiments in Miller's *The Obedience Experiments*. Chapter 7 offers an excellent overview of the generalizability of the research findings to the Holocaust and a deconstruction of the polarity set up by the ensuing discussion of the “normality” and “psychopathology” theses.

4. Fromm's critique of Milgram's conclusions appears on pages 47–52 of Fromm's book and includes an explanation for the rule of conscience in moral decisions and a critique of Milgram's lack of emphasis on those participants in his studies who resisted the authority of the experimenter.

5. See, for example, the work of Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, for a thorough discussion of the tension that exists within individuals in their striving to be self-actualized beings and their apparent need for an authority system to guide their lives. Fromm views our maturity as being dependent on our ability to detach ourselves from the emotional crutches of the past and to rely on our own rationality and objectivity in making decisions in our lives. He writes: “It becomes ever increasingly clear to many students of man and of the

contemporary scene that the crucial difficulty with which we are confronted lies in the fact that the development of man's intellectual capacities has far out-stripped the development of his emotions. Man's brain lives in the twentieth century; the heart of most men lives still in the Stone Age. The majority of men have not yet acquired the maturity to be independent, to be rational, to be objective. They need myths and idols to endure the fact that man is all by himself, that there is no authority which gives meaning to life except man himself. Man represses the irrational passions of destructiveness, hate, envy, revenge; he worships power, money, the sovereign state, the nation: while he pays lip service to the teachings of the great spiritual leaders of the human race, those of Buddha, the prophets, Socrates, Jesus, Mohammed—he has transformed these teachings into a jungle of superstition and idol-worship" (*Escape from Freedom* xiv–xv). Later, in the context of his discussion of freeing ourselves from the oppressive influence of authoritarianism, he analyzes our first act of rebellion, which took place in the Garden of Eden: "Acting against God's orders means freeing himself from coercion, emerging from the unconscious existence of prehuman life to the level of man. Acting against the command of authority, committing a sin, is in its positive human aspect the first act of freedom, that is, the first human act" (50). This book, one of the pillars of modern social psychology, written mid-way through the Second World War, is one of the most powerfully worded testimonials to an ethic of rebellion and disobedience in civil society. Fromm's condemnation of religious faith actualized in obedience to a higher power is representative of many secular treatises on the subject. As we will see below, the Bahá'í Faith offers a compelling counterproposal.

6. Those quotations for which I have been able to verify the original text are cited accordingly. For all others, I have had to rely on Lange's citation.

7. This concept is also expressed by Francis Moloney: "We must be seen as living under the divine urgency to go away from ourselves and to lose ourselves in the mysterious plan of a mysterious God" (*Free to Love* 85).

8. Modern scholarship supports this view. Joseph Braun writes that "internal compliance" is a "natural, healthy expression and perpetuation of an integrated self." It "may be an act of fidelity and loyalty to an essence of oneself and of an external object or group that one has arrived at and touched in the process of healthy growth and individuation. Healthy compliance may be an act of commitment to, and continuity with, one's roots and personal history.... Compliance may represent wholesome allegiance to, and stability of, personal relationships. In short, compliance may be one aspect of mature love" ("Healthy Side" 143). This notion of compliance or obedience as an expression of "mature love" is implicit in the Bahá'í writings on this subject, as will be shown below.

9. Parallel to this theme is the fear of God, which is also an essential element in human relations with our Creator and is powerfully expressed in the Bahá'í writings. I have chosen to focus on love and obedience based on observations of a series of events that led to the issuance by the Universal House of Justice of letters regarding fundamental aspects of obedience to the Covenant.

10. For a more comprehensive and detailed discussion of the Covenant, readers are advised to read Adib Taherzadeh's *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh* and to consult other scholarly works and compilations on the subject.

11. This guidance and the following discussion are informed largely by the 19 May 1994 letter of the House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and the 29 December 1988 letter to the American Bahá'í community.

12. J. E. Esslemont has expressed a similar sentiment in a different context, reinforcing the reciprocal nature of our relationship with God: "Just as calamity is due to disobedience, so deliverance from calamity can be obtained only by obedience. There is no chance or uncertainty about the matter. Turning from God inevitably brings disaster, and turning to God as inevitably brings blessing" (*Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* 95).

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