



*Julio Savi (photo by Tobin Smith)*

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# Destiny and Freedom in the Bahá'í Writings

JULIO SAVI

### *Abstract*

To know the boundaries of one's destiny and freedom and, especially, to know how the latter can be best used are two very common aspirations among human beings. This paper will comment upon a number of relevant, mainly officially translated, Writings, some untranslated Tablets, as well as a few talks by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and interpretations by Shoghi Effendi. Human destiny is a mystery and only the true seeker can obtain an insight into it. Life itself will assist him in this endeavor. Human beings are free, and yet their lives are regulated by the decrees of God, both irrevocable and revocable decrees. A man best uses his freedom, if he understands God's will and makes a disciplined effort to fulfill it in his daily life, with radiant acquiescence.

### *Résumé*

Tout être humain aspire à savoir dans quelle mesure il est libre d'influer sur son destin et, surtout, comment utiliser au mieux sa liberté. L'auteur commente divers Écrits pertinents tirés principalement de traductions officielles, mais provenant aussi de tablettes non encore traduites, de quelques causeries de 'Abdu'l-Bahá, ainsi que d'interprétations des écrits par Shoghi Effendi. Le destin de l'homme est un mystère que seul un vrai chercheur peut espérer appréhender. La vie elle-même l'aidera dans sa quête. Bien que l'être humain soit libre, sa vie est régie par les décrets de Dieu, dont certains sont révocables, d'autres irrévocables. L'être humain utilisera sa liberté au mieux s'il comprend la volonté de Dieu et si, dans la vie de tous les jours, il s'efforce diligemment de l'accomplir avec un acquiescement radieux.

Conocer los límites de nuestro destino y libertad y, especialmente, conocer cómo este último puede ser mejor utilizado son dos aspiraciones muy comunes entre los seres humanos. Este ensayo comentará acerca de un número de Escritos relevantes, principalmente traducciones oficiales, algunas Tablas no traducidas, así como unas charlas de 'Abdu'l-Bahá e interpretaciones de Shoghi Effendi. El destino humano es un misterio y solamente el verdadero buscador puede lograr alguna percepción de él. La vida misma lo asistirá en este empeño. Los seres humanos son libres, y sin embargo sus vidas son reguladas por los decretos de Dios, decretos tanto irrevocables como revocables. Un hombre utiliza mejor su libertad si entiende la voluntad de Dios y hace un esfuerzo disciplinado para cumplir con ella en su vida diaria, con aquiescencia radiante.

Come, for last night, to me, the invisible messenger spake,  
 Saying: "In contentment's stage, be: from destiny flee not."  
 Between the lover and the Beloved, veil is none:  
 Háfiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise . . .

—Háfiz

To know the boundaries of one's destiny and freedom and, especially, to know how the latter—which seems a fundamental element of human life, if human life must have a meaning—can be best used are undoubtedly two very common aspirations among human beings. The Bahá'í Writings give the cue for many reflections on these issues and offer advice on how these two legitimate aspirations may be attained. We will be satisfied with a few considerations based on the study of a number of relevant, authoritatively translated Writings, and some untranslated Tablets, as well as a few talks by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and interpretations by Shoghi Effendi.

#### THE TRUE SEEKER AND THE MYSTERIES OF DESTINY

A first reflection arises from what Bahá'u'lláh writes, in His Four Valleys, about destiny, which in those circumstances He calls "God's immutable decree [*qadar*], His foreordained mystery [*sirr-i-muqaddar*; lit., the mystery

of predestination]” (*Seven Valleys* 57). He writes: “[W]hen searchers inquired of this, He [Imam ‘Alí] made reply, ‘This is a bottomless sea which none shall ever fathom.’ And they asked again, and He answered, ‘It is the blackest of nights through which none can find his way’” (57). Then Bahá’u’lláh adds: “Whoso knoweth this secret will assuredly hide it, and were he to reveal but its faintest trace they would nail him to the cross. Yet, by the Living God, were there any true seeker, I would divulge it to him; for they have said: ‘Love is a light that never dwelleth in a heart possessed by fear’” (57–58).

If we relate these words to our daily experiences, one of the meanings they seem to convey is as follows. Although destiny is a mystery, if one will love God and will have the courage to demonstrate that love through one’s behavior, God’s Messenger will make one understand the secret of one’s destiny and, hopefully, the meaning and the boundaries of one’s freedom.

#### HUMAN BEINGS ARE FREE

That each human being is a free creature is beyond any doubt. Bahá’u’lláh states it very clearly: “Unto each one hath been prescribed a pre-ordained measure, as decreed in God’s mighty and guarded Tablets. All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition [*irádih*]” (*Gleanings* 149, 77:1). One’s freedom makes every human being responsible for one’s own deeds, for which one will finally “be called to give account” (Bahá’u’lláh, Arabic Hidden Words, No. 31), “For surely if deeds were not rewarded and yielded no fruit, then the Cause of God . . . would prove futile” (Bahá’u’lláh, Súriy-i-Vafá, in *Tablets* 189).

Therefore Bahá’u’lláh seems to deny any form of predestination, intended as “the foreordination by God of each individual’s ultimate destiny particularly eternal life” (*Webster’s Third International Dictionary*, s.v. “predestination”). Seemingly He also disallows any form of determinism, intended as “the philosophical theory which holds . . . that all man’s volitions are invariably determined by pre-existing circumstances.”<sup>1</sup> Finally, He seems

to bar the way to any idea similar to those expressed by the Persian philosopher Muḥammad ibn Zakaríyá ar-Rázi (c. 864–932), when he wrote: “Man’s actions are commissioned according to Allah’s decree and destiny, over which men have no choice, and there is not in existence anything other than predestination” (qtd. in Nasr and Leaman 131), or like the ideas expressed by Shamsu’-Dín Háfiz (c. 1318–1390) in the following verses:

Give contentment to that (God) given; unloose the frown from  
thy forehead:  
For, the door of choice is not opened to me and thee.” (89)

According to the Bahá’í teachings, human beings are free and responsible creatures. All we have to do is to discover the boundaries and the meaning of this freedom, so that we may understand the thing of greatest concern for us, how we can best use it.

#### LIFE’S INSIGHTS INTO THE MYSTERIES OF DESTINY

Bahá’u’lláh explains all these concepts in a Tablet He addressed to a lady, whom He calls “the fruit of My Tree and the leaf thereof” (*Gleanings* 132, 68:1). The contents of this Tablet suggest that this lady has lost a son and is understandably upset. Bahá’u’lláh comforts her saying: “Wert thou to scan the pages of the Book of Life [*daftar-i-‘álam*], thou wouldst, most certainly, discover that which would dissipate thy sorrows and dissolve thine anguish” (133). These words seem to suggest that life can give us a wisdom that will help us to understand the meaning and the boundaries of our destiny and of our freedom of choice and thus to live a better life.

In this Tablet to His “leaf” Bahá’u’lláh writes that whatever happens is the fruit of a divine decree. And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that “the divine decrees [*taqádir-i-ilahíyyih*] are the mighty and sound relations among the parts of the created world. Each cause [*amr*] is connected with all the other causes and each affair is bound to the necessary relations among all affairs.”<sup>2</sup> “Nothing can befall us but what God hath destined for us,” writes Bahá’u’lláh in this regard (*Seven Valleys* 35), quoting Qur’án 9:51. These

words remind ears accustomed to Christian Scripture of Matthew 10:29–31: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.” And our remarks could stop here: the highest lesson we can learn from scanning “the pages of the Book of Life” is the capacity of accepting “the summons of His decree [*qadā*],” that is, whatever happens, with “radiant acquiescence [*riḍā*]” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 235, par. 264).

#### TWO KINDS OF DIVINE DECREES

However, Bahá'u'lláh offers to His “leaf” other elements, so that she may begin to cope with her loss. He explains that the events in life are regulated by two kinds of divine decrees: “The one is irrevocable [*maḥtúm*], the other is, as termed by men, impending” (*Gleanings* 133, 68:2). The meanings of “irrevocable” and “impending” decrees are clarified in His Tablet to Áqá Aḥmad: “That which is considered irrevocable is not subject to change. All the rest is subject to change through the effect of means and actions” (84). Bahá'u'lláh's counsel is that “Both [decrees] are to be obeyed and accepted” (*Gleanings* 133, 68:2). And yet, He adds, if God wants, any decree can be modified, even those which He has defined as “irrevocable.” He also states that “[a]s the harm that must result from such a change will be greater than if the decree had remained unaltered, all, therefore, should willingly acquiesce in what God hath willed and confidently abide by the same.”

The possibility for His irrevocable decrees to be changed makes us think of so-called miracles, intended as “a marvelous event occurring within human experience, which cannot have been brought about by human power or by the operation of any natural agency, and must therefore be ascribed to the special intervention of the Deity or of some supernatural being. . . .” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “miracle”).

Certain people turn to God asking Him to perform miracles in their lives. As to these people, Bahá'u'lláh's admonishment is that it is better for us to accept His decrees, because He “knoweth all things and readily answereth the call” (*Tablets* 267). Others think miracles to be impossible

because they imply a breach of the laws of nature. However, Shoghi Effendi explains that “miracles are always possible, even though they do not constitute a regular channel whereby God reveals His power to mankind. . . . God Who is the Author of the universe can, in His Wisdom and Omnipotence, bring any change, no matter how temporary, in the operation of the laws which He Himself has created.”<sup>3</sup>

The concept of miracles, their possibility, and the reason why they are so rare, is explained by Bahá'u'lláh in a Tablet known as *Şahífiy-i-Shatţíyyih* or “Book of the River,” of which we have a provisional translation. In this Tablet Bahá'u'lláh writes:

When viewed with the eye of insight, no phenomenon on earth could be comprehended by any human, whether high or low, without prior observation and experience. Observe the sun in the heavens. To the extent that it is manifest, it giveth splendor and illumination to the entirety of the inhabitants of the earth in the east, the west, and all other directions. Certainly, human reason would not be inclined to accept the possibility of the existence of such a thing by means of any rational definition or description without actual observation and experience. It is the same with all other things in God's creation. Reflect, so that the secret of this question may become disclosed to thee. All things are miracles of the Prophets. . . . (57)

The whole created world is a miracle worked through the ordained flow of God's Revelation, a flow which Bahá'u'lláh compares to the flow of a “flooding river.” He remarks that “[w]hatever hath appeared or will appear is like this river. Each thing moveth or reposeth in its proper place. But if something contrary to this natural flow of events is manifested, the order of the world becometh gravely disrupted” (59). Nader Saiedi, in his article on that Tablet, points out that “[t]he miracles desired by people would involve an unnatural interruption in the natural course of divine revelation. If the river's course were artificially changed, then some dry lands would be irrigated but many others would be destroyed and far more negative consequences would result” (33).

Bahá'u'lláh thus envisages a creation ruled by natural laws which are expressions of the Word of God, intended both as “the Cause which hath preceded the contingent world” and “the Command of God which pervadeth all created things” (Lawḥ-i-Hikmat, in *Tablets* 141), that is, the creative impulse which brings into existence physical reality, but also the universal law pervading the entire creation. The constant operation of those laws is a guarantor of order and harmony. In this sense ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in a Tablet:

Fate [*qadā'*] and predestination [*qadar*] consist in the necessary and indispensable relationships which exist in the realities of things. These relationships have been placed in the realities of existent beings through the power of creation and every incident is a consequence of the necessary relationship. For example, God hath created a relation between the sun and the terrestrial globe that the rays of the sun should shine and the soil should yield. These relationships constitute predestination, and the manifestation thereof in the plane of existence is fate. Will is that active force which controlleth these relationships and these incidents. (*Selections* 207–8, 167.1)

Interestingly, this same definition of fate and predestination, that is, “the necessary and indispensable relationships which exist in the realities of things,” is offered in His Tablet to Dr. Auguste Henri Forel as a definition of nature, that is, “[N]ature . . . is but the essential properties and the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things” (39). In this vein ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: “[T]here are certain things to which man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, decline of power, injuries and misfortunes; these are not subject to the will of man, and he is not responsible for them, for he is compelled to endure them. But in the choice of good and bad actions he is free, and he commits them according to his own will” (*Some Answered Questions* 248, 70:2). Human beings are not as entirely free regarding the material aspects of their lives, as they are in the sphere of moral choices.



IRREVOCABLE DECREES AND HUMAN INNATE  
AND INHERITED CHARACTER

If we consider all these theological and metaphysical statements with respect to our daily lives, each of us could discover the irrevocable decrees of God in our own lives and thus understand something about our “destiny,” intended both as one’s “appointed lot or fortune” as well as “what in the course of events will become or has become of a person” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “destiny”). We could include among the irrevocable decrees of God, that is, among the components of one’s destiny, that which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defines as “the innate character” and “the inherited character” (*Some Answered Questions* 212, 57:2).

As to the “innate character,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself defined it in a talk He delivered in Paris on 14 February 1913, as “the natural or God given personality which the Western thinkers call individuality . . . the inner aspect of man which is not subject to change . . . his God given natural virtues” (“Individuality and Personality” 38). The innate character or individuality implies a “difference of degree; all are excellent, but they are more or less so, according to the degree. So all mankind possess intelligence and capacities [*isti’ dáá*], but the intelligence, the capacity and the worthiness of men differ” (*Some Answered Questions* 212, 57:3). As to the “inherited character,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains: “when the two parents are weak, the children will be weak; if they are strong, the children will be robust. In the same way, purity of blood has a great effect; for the pure germ is like the superior stock which exists in plants and animals” (*Some Answered Questions* 213, 57:5).

Evidently, no human being is given the possibility of consciously choosing one’s “innate” or “inherited character.” They are part of the irrevocable decrees of God. As such, they fix a limit beyond which we cannot go, while we struggle so that we may express all our potentialities during the course of our lives. In other words, the Word of God has decreed for us, at the time of our conception, a body with certain characteristics as well as a spiritual entity, perfect in itself, with its own unique individuality. Bahá’u’lláh seemingly hints at this concept when He writes: “The whole

duty of man in this Day is to attain that share of the flood of grace which God poureth forth for him. Let none, therefore, consider the largeness or smallness of the receptacle. The portion of some might lie in the palm of a man's hand, the portion of others might fill a cup, and of others even a gallon-measure" (*Gleanings* 8, 5:4). On the one hand, Bahá'u'lláh recommends that we make a mighty effort "to attain that share of the flood of grace which God poureth forth for" us. On the other, He urges us to be satisfied with what we are, without considering "the largeness or smallness of the receptacle."

While it is not difficult to agree with the idea that a so-called normal person should accept these irrevocable decrees as to a body and a soul one has received with no possibility of choosing them, it is much more difficult to extend this concept to persons who were less lucky by birth, for example, people with congenital disabilities, or people affected by inborn imperfections received through their "inherited character" that can only be controlled, but never wholly eliminated.

Bahá'u'lláh writes that "[t]he greatness of His mercy surpasseth the fury of His wrath, and His grace encompasseth all who have been called into being and been clothed with the robe of life, be they of the past or of the future" (*Súriy-i-Mulúk*, in *Summons* 208, 5:54). 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "in the creation of God there is no evil" (*Some Answered Questions* 214, 57:10). And Shoghi Effendi has explained that "we must supplicate Bahá'u'lláh to assist us to overcome the failings in our own characters, and also exert our own will-power in mastering ourselves."<sup>4</sup> These words seem to assure us that even the inborn defects received through our "inherited character" are instruments which, if we "exert our own will-power in mastering ourselves," will help us to manifest the perfect gifts of our "God-given individuality," whose attributes, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, are all "praiseworthy, because they are divine in origin" ("Individuality and Personality" 38). For each soul sent into the world so that it may go through the physical experience of life, even those that seem less lucky, our merciful Creator has prepared in advance the best possible conditions for the manifestation of its God-given gifts. As Bahá'u'lláh writes in His Persian Hidden Words: "Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of My command I made thee to

appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things. . . . Out of My loving-kindness, 'neath the shade of My mercy I nurtured thee, and guarded thee by the essence of My grace and favor. And My purpose in all this was that thou mightest attain My everlasting dominion and become worthy of My invisible bestowals" (No. 29).

#### IRREVOCABLE DECREES AND HUMAN ACQUIRED CHARACTER

'Abdu'l-Bahá observes that "the acquired character . . . is gained by education" (*Some Answered Questions* 212, 57:2). And He adds that "the difference of the qualities with regard to culture is very great, for education has great influence" (*Some Answered Questions* 214, 57:8). Elsewhere He emphasizes the great influence exerted by an early education: "It is extremely difficult to teach the individual and refine his character once puberty is passed. By then, as experience hath shown, even if every effort be exerted to modify some tendency of his, it all availeth nothing. He may, perhaps, improve somewhat today; but let a few days pass and he forgetteth, and turneth backward to his habitual condition and accustomed ways" (*Selections* 144–45, sec. 111.7).

Therefore also some aspects of the "acquired character which is gained by education" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 212, 57:2) can be a consequence of the irrevocable decrees of God. In this specific case, those decrees may have brought about facts and events which are beyond the reach of one's personal free choice, because they occurred in an age when the capacity of one's free choice is still limited by the inevitable immaturity of childhood. They can be part of the destiny of a person.

In this respect, we can make the best use of our freedom if we accept to struggle against inborn, inherited, or acquired limits, as insurmountable as they may seem. In fact we know that a perfect understanding of those limits is beyond the reach of our minds. Therefore, since the Bahá'í teachings always urge us to act and encourage us "to attain distinction and excellence in all [our] undertakings" (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 509, 303:1), it is better for us to aim for the highest goals. However, while

making our utmost effort, we should also be ready to accept “with radiant acquiescence” the possibility of being defeated because in any case the effort we will exert, if it is sincere and pure, will help us to become better creatures, even when the immediate goal has not been achieved.

## TWO KINDS OF DIVINE DECREES

Bahá'u'lláh also mentions the “decree that is impending” which “is such that prayer and entreaty can succeed in averting it” (*Gleanings* 133, 68:3). And He adds: “God grant that thou who art the fruit of My Tree, and they that are associated with thee, may be shielded from its evil consequences” (*Gleanings* 133, 68:4). The specific context of this letter explains this statement, that we should also bow to the “decree that is impending.” If a mother has to accept the death of a son with radiant acquiescence, she must have achieved an attitude of complete surrender to the will of God. Bahá'u'lláh explains this concept in greater detail:

Look at a lighted lamp. Its irrevocable decree is that the oil will finish and the wick will be consumed. As long as they endure, the lamp will be lighted and give light. But when they are consumed, the light will be unavoidably extinguished. . . . And in this condition there is neither change nor transformation. This event cannot be either anticipated or postponed by an instant . . . And the lamp is subject to this necessity unless the contingent decrees put in the essence of the earthly world by the Might of the Merciful do not extinguish or destroy it beforehand. And these decrees are manifest in all things, because the all-inclusive Might of God never ceases. . . . For example . . . sometimes it happens that a wind blows on a lamp, before it has come to its end, or that the lamp is extinguished and quenched through other causes of the created world.<sup>5</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers the same explanation in a different perspective: “[C]onditional fate [*qaḍáy-i-mashrút*] may be likened to this: while there is still oil, a violent wind blows on the lamp, which extinguishes it. This is a

conditional fate. It is wise to avoid it, to protect oneself from it, to be cautious and circumspect. But the decreed fate [*qadáy-i-mahtúm*], which is like the finishing of the oil in the lamp, cannot be altered, changed nor delayed (*Some Answered Questions* 244, 68:3). Whereas Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes the necessity of accepting the impending decree, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "It is wise to avoid it, to protect oneself from it, to be cautious and circumspect."

These words are reminiscent of an explanation on tests and difficulties offered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself in a Tablet: "Know thou that ordeals are of two kinds: One kind is for trial (to test the soul) and the other is punishment for actions. 'As a man soweth so shall he also reap.' That which is for testing is educational and developmental and that which is the punishment of deeds is severe retribution" ("Tablet to Portland," in *Rabb* 235). The ordeals "for trial" seem a consequence of the irrevocable decrees of God and, as such, they should be accepted with radiant acquiescence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains in one of His Paris talks: "Tests are benefits from God, for which we should thank Him. Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine Mercy for our own perfecting" (*Paris Talks* 42, 14:7). They enable us at least to demonstrate our love of God through the radiant acquiescence with which we accept them. The ordeals for "punishment" may be the consequence of actions one has performed exerting one's willpower. They can be avoided through wiser behavior. But once a mistake has been made, the best protection against its painful consequence is to make an effort to acquire those spiritual qualities that will assist us to overcome our ordeals and proceed towards further goals of our lives. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains in this regard:

Tests are a means by which a soul is measured as to its fitness, and proven out by its own acts. God knows its fitness beforehand, and also his unpreparedness, but man, with an ego, would not believe himself unfit unless proof were given him. Consequently his susceptibility to evil is proven to him when he falls into the tests, and the tests are continued until the soul realizes its own unfitness, then remorse and regret tend to root out the weakness. The same test comes again in greater degree, until it is shown that a former weakness has become

a strength, and the power to overcome evil has been established.  
(Qtd. in "Worst Enemies" 45)

When a mistake implies a transgression, the remedy is sincere repentance, as Bahá'u'lláh advises: "[R]eturn ye to God and repent, that He, through His grace, may have mercy upon you, may wash away your sins, and forgive your trespasses" (Súriy-i-Mulúk, in *Summons* 207–8, 5:54). However repentance as suggested in the Bahá'í Writings does not imply useless mortifications. As Bahá'u'lláh writes: "God . . . wisheth not the humiliation of His servants" (Bishárát, in *Tablets* 24).

The Bahá'í Writings emphasize the meaning and the value of human sufferings. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "But for the tribulations which are sustained in Thy path, how could Thy true lovers be recognized; and were it not for the trials which are borne for love of Thee, how could the station of such as yearn for Thee be revealed?" (*Prayers and Meditations* 155, 92:1). However, He also writes: "At no time have I been able to reconcile Myself to the afflictions befalling My loved ones, or to any trouble that could becloud the joy of their hearts" (*Gleanings* 308, 142:1). The Bahá'í Faith does not approve that attitude, sometimes termed *dolorism*, whereby some religious communities encourage physical or psychological self-mortification. It recommends not to compromise with one's allegiance to God to avoid pain, but it also teaches not to impose useless, supposedly expiatory, sufferings on oneself. In this vein Bahá'u'lláh wrote to two believers who had decided "to observe maximum austerity in their lives" with a view to contribute more money to the Funds of the Faith: "Let them act with moderation and not impose hardship upon themselves. We would like them both to enjoy a life that is well-pleasing" (qtd. in *Compilation* 1:508, sec. 1155). In this sense George Townshend (1876–1957) writes: "Happiness is our birth-right: it is ours to take, to hold, to possess in perpetuity" (88).

#### THE FREEDOM OF HUMAN DEEDS

In summary, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that human life is ruled by "God's inscrutable Decree" (*Gleanings* 315, 145:1). Sometimes God's decrees are

irrevocable; sometimes they are revocable. In any case it is better for us to accept them with “radiant acquiescence.” Some of the revocable decrees of God seem “subject to change through the effect of means and actions.”<sup>6</sup> It is better for us to be “cautious and circumspect” and wise, in our efforts to modify those decrees according to our wishes, if we want to avoid our own actions having painful consequences.

We may ask: in this vision of a life totally ruled by the decrees of God, how do the Bahá'í Writings explain the dynamics of our free action? A Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh, as well as two talks and a Tablet by 'Abdu'l-Bahá are particularly relevant. Bahá'u'lláh writes: “[M]an should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty. Having attained the stage of fulfilment and reached his maturity, man standeth in need of wealth, and such wealth as he acquireth through crafts or professions is commendable and praiseworthy in the estimation of men of wisdom, and especially in the eyes of servants who dedicate themselves to the education of the world and to the edification of its peoples“ (*Ṭarázát*, in *Tablets* 34–35).

These words seem to mention three elements relevant to action. The first element is knowing oneself, which we can understand in this context as knowing one's innate, hereditary, and acquired character. Undoubtedly, this knowledge assists us both in better understanding the latitude of our freedom of action and in better focusing our efforts. The second element is knowing “that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty,” that is, having a balance that may help us to discern good from evil, to distinguish right from wrong, justice from injustice. The best balance is the Book of God, “the unerring Balance established amongst men,” in which “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. . . .” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 56, par. 99). The Book of God is the repository of teachings through which “every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 68, 27:5). The second element is, therefore, knowing the divine Teachings, through studying

Scripture and applying them to one's daily life. The third element is acquiring the money required for our daily living "through crafts or professions," that is, immersing ourselves in our daily lives, because life itself can teach us how to act, through our successes and failures.

In a talk He delivered on the 30th of May 1912 at the Theosophical Lodge of New York, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "The attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. Unless these three conditions are forthcoming, there is no execution or accomplishment" (*Promulgation* 157). In the same vein He wrote in a Tablet to a believer in New Zealand (*Tablets* 3:691): "[E]very great Cause in this world of existence findeth visible expression through three means: first, intention; second, confirmation; third, action. . . . [Any] intention needeth a dynamic power, so that it may become manifest in the world of being[, that is,] the confirmations of the Kingdom. . . . [T]he intention, the power and the action, all three [should be] brought together (qtd. in *Compilation* 2:164, sec. 1585). In an interview He gave to the *Weekly Budget* on 23 September 1911, through the early American Bahá'í Isabel Chamberlain Fraser (1871–1939), He said moreover: "The afflictions which come to humanity sometimes tend to centre the consciousness upon the limitations, and this is a veritable prison. Release comes by making of the will a Door through which the confirmations of the Spirit come" (*Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 120).

We understand that human actions require four fundamental elements. First, knowledge, that is, knowing both oneself and the circumstances in which one should act. We are able to achieve this knowledge because God has bestowed upon us the power of understanding, the "[f]irst and foremost among [the] favors . . . which the Almighty hath conferred upon man" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 194, 95:1). This power "giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation." This power enables us to understand and seize the opportunities of learning that life constantly gives us. The most important of these opportunities is that of recognizing His Manifestation, Who shows the way we should tread in order to fulfill the purpose of our lives. Second, intention or volition, that is, choosing a goal to pursue in one's known circumstances. Third, confirmation, that is,



the required power for our goal to be achieved. Fourth, action itself. Of these four elements, knowledge, volition, and action depend on the actor. But the confirmations, as necessary as they are for actions to give a result, are totally independent. Therefore the results of our actions do not seem to be entirely in our hands. They depend on having made “of the will a Door through which the confirmations of the Spirit come.” Without God’s confirmations we cannot achieve anything.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the confirmations of the Spirit are “all those powers and gifts which some are born with (and which men sometimes call genius), but for which others have to strive with infinite pains. They come to that man or woman who accepts his life with radiant acquiescence” (*Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 121). In His *Tablets of the Divine Plan* He also writes that the confirmations of the Spirit are “the rain of the bounties of God . . . and the heat of the Sun of Reality” (64, 9:8). In the ancient Scripture they were described as “angels” (*Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections* 86, sec. 39.3; 174, sec. 142.5); in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Writings as “the heavenly cohorts” (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 28, 5:2) and “the Supreme Concourse” (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 51, 8:8). He explains that they “change a gnat into an eagle, a drop of water into rivers and seas, and an atom into lights and suns” (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 73,10:13 ); make “the weak strong, the lowly mighty, the child grown, the infant mature and the small great” (*Tablets* 2:274); “dilate . . . [human] breasts through the fragrances of joy and happiness” (*Tablets* 2:367); bestow “the utmost eloquence, fluency, ability and skill in teaching” (*Tablets* 2:243); give the power to “withstand all who inhabit the earth” (*Tablets* 2:460) and to “quicken the souls” (*Tablets* 3:674). Through those confirmations “tongues . . . become fluent . . . hearts like clear mirrors flooded with the rays of the Sun of Truth . . . thoughts expanded . . . comprehension more vivid and . . . [human beings] progress in the plane of human perfections” (*Promulgation* 458). God bestows His confirmations as He pleases. However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá repeatedly explains what one can do to create such conditions which, like a “magnet,” draw “down the confirmations of God” (*Selections* 89, sec. 41.2).

## PREREQUISITES TO OBTAIN THE DIVINE CONFIRMATIONS

'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that to obtain the divine confirmations "capacity, worth (or merit) and ability, are necessary, for the clearer and purer the mirror is, the lights of the Sun are more manifest thereon" (*Tablets* 2:444). As to capacity, He says in His previously mentioned talk at the Theosophical Lodge of New York that the bounty of God, that is, His confirmation, "is moving, circulating and becomes effective wherever capacity is developed to receive it. In every station there is a specialized capacity" (*Promulgation* 160). He explains in a Tablet: "The decree [*qadar*] is the capacity [*isti'dád*], the worthiness and the measure of things, because the meaning of the decree is the dimension and the divine decrees [*qadáyáy-i-ilahî*], that is, the divine wisdoms that are in the realities of things, are manifested according to the dimension [*qadr*] and the measure of things."<sup>7</sup> In other words, capacity depends in part on the decrees of God, that is, on destiny. However He also says that "capacity is of two kinds: natural capacity and acquired capacity. The first, which is the creation of God, is purely good . . . but the acquired capacity has become the cause of the appearance of evil. For example . . . man begins little by little to accustom himself to poison by taking a small quantity each day, and gradually increasing it, until he reaches such a point that he cannot live without a gram of opium every day" (*Some Answered Questions* 214, 57:10).

Therefore, we must avoid allowing the capacities that God has bestowed upon our God-given individuality to become polluted with the defects we may acquire during our lives. We should rather make sure that our "individualities," that is, our "God given natural virtues," may be "adorned with acquired virtues and perfections" ("Individuality and Personality" 38). In other words, we should try to develop a good character. While so doing, we will become worthy of the descent of the divine confirmations and capable of expressing them through our actions.

On the contrary, quite often human beings who, as children, are all "mirrors upon which no dust has fallen" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 53), do not use their "strength" and their "great power of reason and understanding" to acquire virtues. And they let the dust of their selves dim the

mirror of their souls, spoiling their inborn character. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes in this regard: "In this glorious age the divine confirmations are like unto the rays of the sun. The hearts and souls are like unto the surface of crystal. The clearer the crystal the greater the refulgence of the sunlight" (*Tablets* 3:698).

Shoghi Effendi has explained what we can do to improve our character: "The power of God can entirely transmute our characters and make of us beings entirely unlike our previous selves. Through prayer and supplication, obedience to the divine laws Bahá'u'lláh has revealed, and ever-increasing service to His Faith, we can change ourselves."<sup>8</sup> Shoghi Effendi mentions four ways to improve our character. The first way is a gratuitous gift of God. The other three are prayer and supplication, obedience to the divine laws, and service to His Faith.

As to prayer and supplication, if we want to clean the dimmed mirrors of our souls and acquire other praiseworthy capacities, the first step we should take is to use our willpower to turn our spirits towards our Creator. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: "God is the Supreme Center. The more we turn toward this Center of Light [*markaz-i-anvár*], the greater will be our capacity [*fuyúdat-i-ilahíyyih*, lit. divine bounties]" (*Promulgation* 15). 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes about prayer: "The state of prayer is the best of conditions, for man is then associating with God" (*Selections* 211, sec. 172). He counsels: "Beseech thou from God's infinite grace whatsoever thou desirest. But wert thou to heed my advice thou wouldst desire naught save entrance into the Abhá Kingdom, and seek naught save the bounties of the Beauty of the All-Glorious. . . ." (qtd. in *Compilation* 2:231, sec. 1741). And Shoghi Effendi explains: "The true worshipper, while praying, should endeavour not so much to ask God to fulfil his wishes and desires, but rather to adjust these and make them conform to the Divine Will. Only through such an attitude can one derive that feeling of inner peace and contentment which the power of prayer alone can confer."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the highest aspiration of prayer is the reunion with God that in Bahá'í language is the spiritual encounter with His Manifestation on earth, and submission to His Will.

As to obedience, it is the consequence of one's recognition of God's

Manifestation, as stated in the first verse of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The first expression of one's "obedience to the divine laws Bahá'u'lláh has revealed" is one's steadfastness in the Covenant. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that the Covenant is "the magnet of confirmation and assistance, the attracter of all success and the leader of hosts of gifts" (*Tablets* 1:172). He writes in this regard: "in the beginning the believers must make their steps firm in the Covenant so that the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh may encircle them from all sides, the cohorts of the Supreme Concurrence may become their supporters and helpers" (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 52, 8:8).

Steadfastness in the Covenant implies, in the first place, a mental recognition of Bahá'u'lláh's "essential infallibility" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 171, 45:2), of the "acquired" or "conferred infallibility" (173, 45:4) of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, of Shoghi Effendi as well as of the "body of the House of Justice," which is "under the protection and unerring guidance of God" (173, 45:4). Immediately after, it implies a prompt obedience to their guidance. To obey them means to orient the sails of the vessel of one's soul in the direction from which the wind of the Spirit blows and thus to impart the immense energy of the divine confirmations to that vessel and obtain an extraordinary capacity of progress. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes in this regard: "If in this day a soul shall act according to the precepts and the counsels of God, he will serve as a divine physician to mankind, and like the trump of Isráfíl, he will call the dead of this contingent world to life; for the confirmations of the Abhá Realm are never interrupted, and such a virtuous soul hath, to befriend him, the unfailing help of the Company on high" (*Selections* 26, sec. 8.4). Since this guidance is a tangible expression of the Will of God, to follow it means to conform one's will to the divine Will and, while so doing, to accept its irrevocable and revocable decrees, according to Bahá'u'lláh's counsel. Finally, steadfastness in the Covenant creates unity, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "you may rest assured that whenever you are united, the confirmations of the Kingdom of Abhá will reach you, the heavenly favors will descend, the bounties of God will be bestowed, the Sun of Reality will shine, the cloud of mercy will pour its showers, and the breeze of divine generosity will waft its fragrances upon you" (*Promulgation* 428).

As to service to His Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "Faith is the magnet which draws the confirmation of the Merciful One. Service is the magnet which attracts the heavenly strength. I hope thou wilt attain both" (*Tablets* 1:62). These words take on a more pregnant meaning in the light of a definition of faith given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "By the faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge [*dánistan*], and second, the practice of good deeds [*'amali-khayr*]" (*Tablets* 3:549). Service and faith are inextricably bound to one another and together attract the divine confirmations. And Shoghi Effendi says: "As we give to God, as we serve Him and love Him, so will He vouchsafe to us His Mercy, Guidance and Protection."<sup>10</sup>

Among the many forms of service, teaching, that is, carrying "the message of Bahá'u'lláh to every stratum of human society and every walk of life" (The Universal House of Justice, "Extracts" 118, 52:2), occupies a pre-eminent position. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that teaching "is the magnetic power which attracts the confirmation of God" (*Tablets* 3:625).

Another laudable form of service is for a human being to "vie with his fellows in service to the good of all" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 113). 'Abdu'l-Bahá says in this regard: "Today the confirmations of the Kingdom of Abhá are with those who renounce themselves, forget their own opinions, cast aside personalities and are thinking of the welfare of others" (qtd. in Waite, "Supplication and Service" 348).

Service implies an inner attitude indispensable to receiving the divine confirmations: detachment. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes in this regard: "Separate thyself from all thoughts, strip thyself from the unclean garment of attachment to this drossful (or earthly) world, arise for the service of thy Lord, the Clement, and be clothed with the robe of assurance (or certainty) so that thou mayest behold the hosts of confirmation from thy Lord arising from all sides" (*Tablets* 3:650).

The highest expression of detachment is detachment from oneself or evanescence, about which 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

[Man] must become evanescent in God. Must forget his own selfish conditions that he may thus arise to the station of sacrifice. It should be to such a degree that if he sleep, it should not be for pleasure, but

to rest the body in order to do better, to speak better, to explain more beautifully, to serve the servants of God and to prove the truths. When he remains awake, he should seek to be attentive, serve the Cause of God and sacrifice his own stations for those of God. When he attains to this station, the confirmations of the Holy Spirit will surely reach him, and man with this power can withstand all who inhabit the earth. (*Tablets* 2:460)

In this sense the Bahá'í International Community writes: "One of the paradoxes of human life is that development of the self comes primarily through commitment to larger undertakings in which the self—even if only temporarily—is forgotten" (265–66).

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF ENDEAVOR AND DISCIPLINE

Pursuing these prerequisites to obtain the divine confirmations requires a great endeavor by human beings. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Success or failure, gain or loss, must . . . depend upon man's own exertions. The more he striveth, the greater will be his progress" (*Gleanings* 81–82, 34:8). He writes moreover: "Endeavor [*jahd*] is required, albeit God doeth as he wil- leth and ordaineth as He pleaseth."<sup>11</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: "[I]ndolence and laxity hinder the outpourings of love from the clouds of divine mercy, and people will thus remain deprived" (qtd. in "Importance of Obligatory Prayer" 2:4). He also says: "Effort, the utmost effort, is required" (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 27–28, 5:2). And in one of His Paris talks conveyed through Isabel Fraser He says: "Capacity is in accordance with striving and sincerity" (*Divine Philosophy* 114). Finally, Shoghi Effendi says on the importance of perseverance in one's endeavors: "Even if the action should not immediately produce results, or perhaps not be entirely correct, that does not make so much difference . . . if someone's action is wrong, God can use that method of showing the pathway which is right."<sup>12</sup> This is reminiscent of the importance of discipline in human life, a quality to be pursued from early childhood. As Shoghi Effendi writes: "Discipline of some sort, whether physical, moral or intellectual, is indeed indispensable,

and no training can be said to be complete and fruitful if it disregards this element."<sup>13</sup> In a way, the Bahá'í teachings on endeavor and discipline seem not dissimilar from the idea expressed by Mawláná Jalálu'd-Dín Rúmí (1207–1273) when he said: "Endeavour is not a struggle with Destiny [*qadā*]" (1:55). It rather is a struggle to fulfill one's destiny.

#### TRUST IN GOD AND HIS GOOD-PLEASURE

The idea that whatever happens is written in the divine decrees, that each of us has a prearranged individuality beyond which one will never be able to go, that even a number of the defects acquired in this world can be predestined and insurmountable, could in a way discourage human efforts. A first consideration is that the divine decrees are inscrutable, that our individuality may be not so well known, that the possibility for a miracle to remove a flaw we perceive as unacceptable and insurmountable is real—albeit remote—that our actions can influence the "impending decree," although we do not know whether this influence will be for our immediate good or not. This "ignorance" of us as human beings, which some of us may perceive as an unpleasant limitation, can thus be a real blessing in disguise. As Bahá'u'lláh writes in His Persian Hidden Words: "Didst thou behold immortal sovereignty, thou wouldst strive to pass from this fleeting world. But to conceal the one from thee and to reveal the other is a mystery which none but the pure in heart can comprehend" (No. 41). This is why the first quality that assists us is trust in God. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "Trust in the grace of thy Lord. He shall surely assist thee with a confirmation whereat minds will be amazed and the thoughts of the men of learning will be astonished" (*Tablets* 2:285).

The Bahá'í Writings abound in counsels and admonishments that encourage us to acquire this vital attitude of trust, submission, and surrender to the divine Will, as we struggle to obtain God's confirmations, which geniuses achieve without any effort and ordinary human beings must conquer with infinite toils and pains. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "[L]ook thou not at the degree of thy capacity [*isti'dád*], look thou at the boundless favour of Bahá'u'lláh. . . ." (*Selections* 188, 153.3). He also



writes: “do not consider thy capacity and merit, but rely upon the infinite bounty and trust to His Highness the Almighty. Do not delay. Undertake soon that which thou art intending” (*Tablets* 3:564–65).

This attitude helps us to win the indispensable good-pleasure of God, that is, “Paradise” (*Súriy-i-Vafá'*, in *Tablets* 189) and, with that, His confirmations. As Bahá'u'lláh writes in this regard: “Were anyone to wash the feet of all mankind, and were he to worship God in the forests, valleys, and mountains, upon high hills and lofty peaks, to leave no rock or tree, no clod of earth, but was a witness to his worship—yet, should the fragrance of My good pleasure [*riḏá'í*] not be inhaled from him, his works would never be acceptable unto God” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 31, par. 36).

#### THE TRUE JOIE DE VIVRE

Trust in God and the attainment of His good-pleasure are always accompanied by another inner attitude that is very important to win the divine confirmations, the true joie de vivre. Bahá'u'lláh mentions repeatedly this joy: “Obey . . . [the Laws of God] with joy and gladness, for this is best for you, did ye but know” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 73, par. 148); “Rejoice in the gladness of thine heart, that thou mayest be worthy to meet Me and to mirror forth My beauty” (*Arabic Hidden Words*, No. 36); “It behoveth them that are endowed with insight and understanding to observe that which will cause joy and radiance” (*Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih*, in *Tablets* 71). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in one of His Paris talks:

Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness. But when sadness visits us we become weak, our strength leaves us, our comprehension is dim and our intelligence veiled. The actualities of life seem to elude our grasp, the eyes of our spirits fail to discover the sacred mysteries, and we become even as dead beings. (*Paris Talks* 109–10, 35:2)



If we surrender to dismay, we lose our capacity to understand the wisdom of the divine decrees, which are among “the sacred mysteries,” and thus we also lose His confirmations. Therefore He advises: “When our thoughts are filled with the bitterness of this world, let us turn our eyes to the sweetness of God’s compassion and He will send us heavenly calm! If we are imprisoned in the material world, our spirit can soar into the Heavens and we shall be free indeed!” (*Paris Talks* 111, 35:810).

#### WHICH FREEDOM?

What is then our freedom? The relevant definitions of the dictionaries read as follows: “The condition of being able to act in any desired way without hindrance or restraint; faculty or power to do as one likes” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “liberty”); “The quality of being free from the control of fate or necessity; the power of self-determination attributed to the will” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “freedom”). A number of passages in the Bahá’í Writings seem to deny this kind of freedom. For example, Bahá’u’lláh writes: “[I]n one sense whatever happens is and will always be irrevocable. . . its execution itself is a proof of its own inevitability.”<sup>14</sup> “[T]he mesh of divine destiny exceedeth the vastest of mortal conceptions, and the dart of His decree [*taqdír*] transcendeth the boldest of human designs. None can escape the snares He setteth, and no soul can find release except through submission [*riḍa*] to His will” [*iradih-ash*] (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 251, par. 278). And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says in one of His talks conveyed through Isabel Fraser: “Nothing has been created without a special destiny, for every creature has an innate station of attainment. This flower has been created to mirror forth a harmonious ensemble of color and perfume. Each kingdom of nature holds potentialities and each must be cultivated in order to reach its fulfillment” (*Divine Philosophy* 105–6). Bahá’u’lláh goes as far as writing: “We exalt whomsoever We please unto the Realm of supernal might and glory, and, should We so desire, cause the same to sink into the lowest abyss of degradation” (Súriy-i-Haykal, in *Summons* 36, 1:68)—words seemingly suggesting concepts similar to those expounded by Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) in his *On the Predestination of the*

*Saints*: “God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, predestinating us to the adoption of children, not because we were going to be of ourselves holy and immaculate, but He chose and predestinated us that we might be so” (1:37). Almost everything seems already written, even our ultramundane destiny. However, Bahá'u'lláh solves our perplexities explaining the meaning and limits of our destiny and of our freedom.

In the first place, He explains: “This fore-knowledge of God . . . should not be regarded as having caused the actions of men, just as your own previous knowledge that a certain event is to occur, or your desire that it should happen, is not and can never be the reason for its occurrence” (*Gleanings* 150, 77:1). And since these words may seem unclear, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has commented upon them in His *Some Answered Questions*. In a philosophical perspective, He explains: “[T]he essential knowledge of God surrounds . . . the realities of things, before as well as after their existence, and it does not become the cause of their existence. It is a perfection of God. . . . [T]he knowledge of God in the realm of contingency does not produce the forms of the things. On the contrary, it is purified from the past, present and future. It is identical with the reality of the things; it is not the cause of their occurrence” (138–39 35:2–4).

God, Whose Word has set in motion the process of creation and has infused it with His ordaining Command, Whose Manifestation bestows upon humankind a religion that expresses “the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 158, 40:7), that is, both the nature and the destiny of human beings, knows the essence of His Own creation and therefore He also perfectly knows its evolution, because in His timeless perspective the beginning and the end coincide. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains this concept through some examples: “[T]onight everyone knows that after seven hours the sun will rise, but this general foreknowledge does not cause the rising and appearance of the sun. . . . The mathematicians by astronomical calculations know that at a certain time an eclipse of the moon or the sun will occur. Surely this discovery does not cause the eclipse to take place” (*Some Answered Questions* 138–39, 35:3–6).

However, these explanations do not clarify the boundaries of our freedom,

specifically those of our “power of self-determination attributed to the will.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clarifies in this regard that “the conditions of existence are limited to the conditions of servitude, of prophethood and of Deity” (*Some Answered Questions* 230, 62:1). We as human beings belong to the condition of “servitude.” He elucidates the meaning of our condition: “Man is absolutely helpless and dependent, since might and power belong especially to God. Both exaltation and humiliation depend upon the good pleasure and the will of the Most High” (248–49, 70:4). And in His statement He goes as far as saying: “Also the inaction or the movement of man depend upon the assistance of God [*tá’yíd-i-Yazdán*]. If he is not aided, he is not able to do either good or evil. But when the help of existence comes from the Generous Lord, he is able to do both good and evil; but if the help is cut off, he remains absolutely helpless” (249, 70:6).

We are like “a ship which is moved by the power of the wind or steam; if this power ceases, the ship cannot move at all” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 249.). It is at this point that He gives the key to understand the limits of our freedom: “[T]he rudder of the ship turns it to either side, and the power of the steam moves it in the desired direction.” We have not the power to move the ship. But we have the rudder in our hands to turn it to either side. Thus we are free in “the choice of good or evil.”

Referring these concepts to our personal lives, we can carry out the decrees of God, or try to modify them, roughly in two ways, with many different shades in between. We can remain focused on our selves, closed in a narrow universe, whose little sun is our ego, under the illusion that we are pursuing and achieving victories that we have won unaided. In this case, if we fail, we will feel wretched and depressed. If we succeed, we will feel proud. Perhaps a few of us may have contributed “to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Lawḥ-i-Kamál*, in *Gleanings* 215, 109:2). However, we will have no spiritual merit, because in reality we were not working for the common good, but only for our personal glorification. And, as the Báb has reportedly said, “The time is come when naught but the purest motive, supported by deeds of stainless purity, can ascend to the throne of the Most High and be acceptable unto Him” (qtd. in Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 93). If we act in such a way, as happy or unhappy

as we are, depending on the material conditions surrounding us, our souls, sent to this world to discover in themselves the divine virtues, that is, the traces of God that make them creatures made in God's image and after His likeness, will not discover their true identity. Their God-given individuality will not be strengthened through the acquisition of other virtues, but will be dimmed by "the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 192, par. 213). We will not fulfill the purpose of our lives, to know and to worship our Creator. Bahá'u'lláh writes that this is the depths of human misfortune, this is "true loss": spending one's days "in utter ignorance of . . . [one's] self" (Aṣl-i-Kullu'l-Khayr, in *Tablets* 156) and withholding from oneself "the grace of God and His mercy" (Lawḥ-i-Ashraf, in *Gleanings* 104, 52:1).

On the contrary, we can carry out the divine decrees, or try to modify them, with the conscious intention of making the will of God in our lives and on earth. In other words, we can hearken to the following words of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: "Hold ye fast unto His statutes and commandments, and be not of those who, following their idle fancies and vain imaginings, have clung to the standards fixed by their own selves, and cast behind their backs the standards laid down by God" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 25, par. 17). While so doing, we will pursue the knowledge and the love of God as well as the promotion of civilization. Our God-given individualities will emerge in full light; nay, they will be enriched through praiseworthy capacities and virtues acquired in the course of our lives. Our lives will be characterized by a feeling of serenity that cannot be disturbed either by the ephemeral joys of "prosperity" or the fleeting afflictions of "abasement," in the awareness that "both shall pass away and be no more" (Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words, No. 52).

While explaining "the mysteries of divine decree and destiny" Bahá'u'lláh writes in His *Ṣaḥífiy-i-Shaṭṭíyyih*:

Each thing moveth or reposeth in its proper place. But if something contrary to this natural flow of events is manifested, the order of the world becometh gravely disrupted. . . . It is for this reason that, in every age and century, as He desireth, the Unique Hidden One and

the Eternal Essence manifesteth that true River and real Sea and causeth it to flow, adorning it with a new temple and a new vesture. All those structures of vain imaginings and palaces of the ungodly are then swept away and destroyed in its waters. With utmost desire and thirst they drown and perish, lacking even the faintest awareness that they could quaff a draught thereof. Thus doth God bestow life upon whom He willeth, and taketh it away from whom He willeth, and confirmeth whom He pleaseth, and denieth whom He pleaseth, could ye but perceive it. (59)

Whenever “the order of the world” is “gravely disrupted,” God graciously reveals His decrees to humankind through His Manifestations, so that human beings may do their utmost to carry them out in the world and restore the order of the world. But even if human beings do not hearken to His summons, His decrees will nevertheless be enforced, because God has a “Major Plan” of His own, and uses “both the mighty and lowly as pawns in His world-shaping game, for the fulfillment of His immediate purpose and the eventual establishment of His Kingdom on earth” (Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 139). Whenever God reveals His decrees to humankind through His Manifestation, initially most human beings arise in opposition and rebellion. Only a few of them follow Him. And even among those who follow Him, only a few achieve the condition of absolute evanescence, placing their whole lives at His service. Nevertheless He fulfills His purpose using all human beings as “pawns” of His great games. Some of them are unaware, sometimes even rebellious, pawns. Others are aware and willing to different degrees. In a definition, which some of us may perceive as trenchant, Shoghi Effendi writes that whoever does not heed His call serves in “the forces of darkness” and whoever does, serves in “the army of light” (*Citadel* 26). The freedom of human beings is limited to the choice to side with the former or the latter. In reality God alone will decide whether this choice of theirs will be confirmed or not, because God “confirmeth whom He pleaseth, and denieth whom He pleaseth” (Bahá'u'lláh, “*Şahífiy-i-Shatt'íyyih*” 59).

These reflections will raise different feelings in the hearts of different persons. Many centuries ago Rúmí described our condition as servants of

God with the following verses: "We are as pieces of chess (engaged) in victory and defeat: our victory and defeat is from thee, O thou whose qualities are comely!" (*Mathnaví* 1:35, v. 600). And he exalted the spiritual rank achieved through radiant acquiescence thus:

Do you bear (His burden)? He will cause you to be borne (aloft). Do you receive (His commands)? He will cause you to be received (into His favour).

If you accept His command, you will become the spokesman (thereof); if you seek union (with Him), thereafter you will become united.

(*Mathnaví* 1:52–53, v. 936–39)

A great light is shed on this entangling issue by the following words by Bahá'u'lláh:

The Book of Life is a testimony of the inscrutable decree (*qadā*) . . . For the wise ones the decree of God is loved and all of them are satisfied, nay grateful. Whosoever protests was not and is not acceptable. "Whosoever is not content with My decree let him find seek a Lord other than Me." Whoever knows and understands the fruits of the tree of the decree will not be short of bliss, happiness, exhilaration, delight, resignation, acquiescence (*ridā*).<sup>15</sup>

All our reflections bring us back to our starting point: radiant acquiescence. This attitude of energetic and joyous surrender to the Will of God is a vital element of the wisdom that Bahá'u'lláh recommends, in the Tablet to His leaf that we have analyzed, to be acquired through our scanning of "the pages of the Book of Life." We are wholly in the hands of God. Our vaunted freedom does not concern so much the concrete events of life that seemingly mostly depend on His decrees. It rather concerns the intentions with which we perform our daily actions. Their results also are in His hands. But this condition of servitude, impotence, and ignorance of the decrees of destiny, which may be perceived as a reason for humiliation and wretchedness, is on the contrary a great bounty. It gives us a reason to

struggle in our lives so that we may achieve the goals we have set before ourselves, in the hope that He may graciously confirm our actions and in the awareness that our wholehearted adherence to the religion He has sent us—a religion which acquaints us with “the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 158, 40:7)—is the best thing we can do to abide by His decrees and, God willing, earn His confirmations. And all they who “see the end and the beginning as one; nay . . . see neither beginning nor end,” they who “have passed over the worlds of names, and fled beyond the worlds of attributes as swift as lightning” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys* 15) and “regard the world even as a shadow that vanisheth swifter than the twinkling of an eye” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 15, sec. 12, para. 1) and themselves as less than “the black in the eye of a dead ant” (Bahá’u’lláh, Súriy-i-Haykal, in *Summons* 82, par. 156), all these people “from sorrow” turn to bliss, from anguish to joy” and their “grief and mourning yield to delight and rapture” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys* 29). They have truly achieved the freedom Bahá’u’lláh has come to bring to humankind, not only “freedom from want” and “from war,” but also “freedom to unite, freedom to progress, freedom in peace and joy” (The Universal House of Justice, “Individual Rights” 518).

#### NOTES

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1. *Catholic Encyclopedia*. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04756c.htm>>, accessed 21 March 2010.

2. Lawḥ-i-Jináb-i-Áqá Mírzá Yúsif-i-Burújirdí, in Mázandarání 83–84; translation by the author.

3. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 27 February 1938, in *Lights of Guidance*, 489, sec. 1638.

4. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 27 January 1945, in *Compilation* 1:382, sec. 811.

5. Tablet to Áqá Siyyid Mihdí, in Ra'fati 96–97; translation by the author.
6. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet to Áqá Aḥmad, in Ra'fati 84; translation by the author.
7. Qtd. in Ishráq *Khávarí* 2:40; translation by the author.
8. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 22 November 1941, in *Compilation* 2:240, sec. 1770.
9. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 26 October 1938, in *Compilation* 2:239, sec. 1768.
10. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 5 November 1949, in *Lights of Guidance* 130, sec. 433.
11. Tablet to Áqá Siyyid Mihdí, in Ra'fati 97; translation by the author.
12. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 22 August 1957, in *Compilation* 2:325, sec. 2011.
13. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 9 July 1939, in *Compilation* 1:303, sec. 673.
14. Tablet to Áqá Siyyid Mihdí, in Ra'fati 97; translation by the author.
15. Tablet to Ḥájí Muḥammad Javád, in Ra'fati 98; translation by the author.

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