

Some Reflections on the Structure of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas

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Abstract

Secondary literature on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas has tended to comment that the book is relatively unstructured—that it is a mix of topics without any logical or discernible order. This short article challenges the assumption that the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is unstructured and suggests there is value to our understanding of the book and of Bahá'í law by exploring further elements of structure. Particular emphasis is placed on the first nineteen paragraphs of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and how they state in most concise form the pivotal constructs of Bahá'í spiritual and social teachings.

Resumé

La littérature secondaire au sujet du Kitáb-i-Aqdas tend à dire qu'il s'agit d'un ouvrage relativement peu structuré, un mélange de sujets sans ordre logique ou apparent. L'auteur de ce court article remet en question l'affirmation que le Kitáb-i-Aqdas n'est pas structuré et laisse entendre qu'en approfondissant davantage les éléments de structure, nous gagnerions en compréhension du livre et des lois bahá'ies. L'auteur met l'accent sur les dix-neuf premiers paragraphes du Kitáb-i-Aqdas et souligne à quel point ils énoncent avec la plus grande concision les concepts fondamentaux des enseignements spirituels et sociaux bahá'ís.

Resumen

La literatura secundaria sobre el Kitáb-i-Aqdas han tendido a comentar que el libro relativamente no tiene estructura, que es una mezcla de temas sin ningún orden lógico o discernible. Este breve artículo cuestiona la suposición de que el Kitáb-i-Aqdas carece de estructura y sugiere que hay valor a nuestra comprensión del libro y de la ley bahá'í mediante la exploración de elementos mas profundos de estructura. Se hace énfasis especial en los primeros diecinueve párrafos del Kitáb-i-Aqdas y cómo muestran en forma concisa, las construcciones fundamentales de las enseñanzas espirituales y sociales bahá'ís.

Very little has been written about the structure of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the “Most Holy Book” of the Bahá'í Faith, which is also often referred to as Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws. With a few notable exceptions,¹ the bulk of the comments on the structure of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas suggests that the work is in various ways unstructured. For example, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas has been compared to the Qur'án as a work “in which legislation is often alluded to rather than expounded and in which

1 One example of an exception to the view that the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is unstructured is provided by Nader Saiedi in *Logos and Civilization*. Saiedi challenges the assumption that the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is a “random listing of unrelated laws” and suggests that the laws have “meaningful connections” (266). He provides a relatively detailed scheme for the organization of the paragraphs of the book, around a number of core principles.

disparate topics are placed together without obvious logic” (Walbridge). Similarly, it has been observed that in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, there are “no *numerus clausus*: legal norms (like moral instructions) are scattered throughout the revealed scripture. They do not form a consistent system instead, they constitute supreme norms (as in the case of legal provisions in the *Qur’án*) that require systematization and specification” (Schaefer 317). As another prominent scholar observes, “Bahá’u’lláh, after expounding some of His choicest teachings or revealing some of His counsels and exhortations, abruptly changes the subject and gives one or more laws which outwardly seem not to have any relevance to the previous subject” (Taherzadeh 277).

Such observations about the structure of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* are sometimes advanced in support of arguments about the nature of Bahá’í law and elements of the Bahá’í teachings. By advancing expectations that law be written, systematized, and organized—that it have a “rigid outline” (Walbridge)—and by suggesting that Bahá’u’lláh did not reflect these expectations, we open a door to certain assertions or arguments about the legal aspects of Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation of laws and their importance. For example, the suggestion that the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is unstructured and does not meet our norms of legal texts might be used to justify the view that the precepts contained in it are not meant to be statements of legal rules, but

should be understood primarily as ethical norms and principles.

As I have discussed elsewhere,² Bahá’u’lláh does offer a distinct and quite radical concept of law—one that represents a sharp break from the Shiite legal context in which the Bahá’í Faith was born, and that challenges formalist and positivist conceptions of religious law. The concept of law in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings does not fall into established *Qur’anic* or other Scriptural categories, nor does it conform to Eurocentric assumptions about the form and nature of law. Rather, Bahá’u’lláh articulates a concept of law grounded in a particular understanding of the human being, as well as the role of law in social change, which at once accepts the social construction of law in action while maintaining fidelity to a teleological understanding of human nature.

In this article, I develop further arguments about Bahá’u’lláh’s legal vision, challenging assertions about the ostensibly unstructured format of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and paying particular attention to its paragraph 19 and how it contributes to our understanding of the book’s structure.

THE ARCS OF ASCENT AND DESCENT

In some respects it might be surprising to the reader who first opens the

² See Roshan Danesh, “Some Reflections on the Concept of Law in the Bahá’í Faith,” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 24.1–2 (2014).

Kitáb-i-Aqdas to hear the commonly expressed view that the book is unstructured; the opening paragraphs appear to have a relatively clear thematic structure.

The first five paragraphs of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas stand together as a statement of the central elements of Bahá'í ontology and locate Bahá'u'lláh's concept of law within that ontology. Bahá'u'lláh refers, in various ways, to God, the Primal Will, the Manifestation, and humanity, as well as to the relationships among them. The primary responsibility of the individual human being is recognition of the Manifestation "Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation," and the individual is exhorted "to observe every ordinance" the Manifestation reveals (19).

Bahá'u'lláh continues in the first five paragraphs to provide a series of observations about the nature of His laws and ordinances and to develop the meaning and concept of law He is propounding. In this regard, He both grounds His concept of law (*hudúd*) in a particular vision of human nature and the purpose of human existence and distinguishes it from mere rules (*ahkam*). This distinction reflects His conception of the human soul as well as His vision of the relationship between unity and diversity as the metanarrative of human history and the force and purpose of social change³.

³ Bahá'u'lláh's concept of law, including His legal language, and the

He thereby highlights the role of knowledge and love as the rationale and the foundation for choosing to obey His laws.

These opening paragraphs might be said to reflect the metaphor of a circle that is sometimes used to describe Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about the structure of reality—that there is an arc of descent and an arc of ascent. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the structure of reality in the following terms:

Praise be to God Who hath ever caused His Names and Attributes to penetrate the degrees of existence; Who hath made the effects of those Names and Attributes to shine resplendent and their signs to be firmly established in both the hidden and manifest worlds. By them He hath made the holy realities that are informed by His grace and are the recipients of His outpourings to be the sole revealers of all that pertaineth unto Him, and hath caused them to move through the firmament of perfection in arcs of descent and ascent. (*Lavh-i-Aflak* [Tablet of the Universe], provisional translation)

relationship of law to the human soul, as well as to Bahá'í teaching regarding unity, are discussed in some detail in Roshan Danesh, "Some Reflections on the Concept of Law in the Bahá'í Faith", *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 24.1–2 (2014). This article is a companion to that previous piece.

The arc of descent expresses the movement from God (at the peak or apex) to creation, symbolized as a downward arc. It is an expression of how human beings are from God and of the order of things in creation. The arc of ascent speaks to a movement upward, of how we return unto God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the place of humanity in this scheme in the following terms:

For the inner reality of man is a demarcation line between the shadow and the light, a place where the two seas meet; it is the lowest point on the arc of descent, and therefore is it capable of gaining all the grades above. With education it can achieve all excellence; devoid of education it will stay on, at the lowest point of imperfection. (*Selections* 130)

If we understand the first five paragraphs as expressing the arc of descent, and recognition and obedience as the key to a human being's ascent, we see a shift in paragraph 6. In paragraphs 6 through 18 Bahá'u'lláh identifies the fundamental spiritual obligations of the individual human being—obligatory prayer, fasting, and repetition of "Allah-u-Abhá."⁴ While

⁴ Bahá'u'lláh revealed three obligatory prayers. Each prayer has specific observances to be followed, such as the time at which it is to be recited. Bahá'ís may choose which one of the three prayers to say daily. On the last month of the Bahá'í

paragraphs 1 through 5 explain the principles of descent and ascent at a metaphysical level, paragraph 6 transitions to discussing the dynamics of ascent in the physical world, in how we lead our daily lives. The spiritual obligations that are identified, beginning in paragraph 6, are the fundamental architecture of ascent—they are the practices that individuals perform to focus their mind and body on their spiritual reality, and on their relationship with their Creator.

Taken together, therefore, we see that in paragraphs 1 through 18 Bahá'u'lláh is moving us on the arcs of descent and ascent. He moves us quickly to that "demarcation line" on which humanity resides and speaks about the fundamentals needed for a human being's ascent.

It should be acknowledged that a few scholars have noted, in various ways, the relationship between the theme, or metaphor, of ascent and descent and the structure of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. For example, Adib Taherzadeh uses the same metaphor to describe the structure of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* but employs the terms in a different way, in which ascent refers to the revelation of spiritual principles and descent

calendar, fasting is enjoined from sunrise to sunset. Fasting is intended to serve a number of purposes, including providing a time of heightened consciousness on one's spiritual being. Bahá'ís are also instructed to repeat "Allah-u-Abhá" (God is Most Glorious) ninety-five times a day (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 18).

refers to the proclamation of laws to be obeyed by humanity:

In revealing the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh may be likened to a celestial bird whose habitation is in the realm of the spirit far above the ken of men, soaring in the spiritual heights of glory. In that station, Bahá'u'lláh speaks about spiritual matters, reveals the verities of His Cause and unveils the glory of His Revelation to mankind. From such a lofty horizon this immortal Bird of the Spirit suddenly and unexpectedly descends upon the world of dust. In this station, Bahá'u'lláh announces and expounds laws. Then the Bird takes its flight back into the spiritual domains. Here the Tongue of Grandeur speaks again with majesty and authority, revealing some of the choicest passages treasured in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*....

This ascent and descent, the revelation of spiritual teachings on the one hand, and the giving of laws on the other, follow one another throughout the Book. (276–77)

In his article “Unsealing the Choice Wine at the Family Reunion,” Bahá'í author, John S. Hatcher provides one of the most systematic and scholarly analyses of the concept of the arcs of ascent and descent, including the relationship of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* to this theme in Bahá'u'lláh's writings.

Hatcher has developed his analysis in a range of works—including *The Arc of Ascent*—that provide detailed discussion of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* as identifying the dynamics of the ascent of humanity's individual and collective life and of the relationship between physical and spiritual reality and how they relate to the role of the laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in our individual lives. Hatcher's work provides important insights into how the structure of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* relates to the complex process of a human being's spiritual ascent, beginning with the importance of the twin duties of “recognition” and “obedience” identified in the opening paragraph of the book as expressing

the two-part paradigm that frames the entire process of divine enlightenment, defines the fundamental properties that distinguish all human activity, and establishes with clarity the unique position and status of *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in the evolution of humankind on our planet. (“Unsealing” 28)

Professor Nader Saiedi—who provides one of the few sustained efforts to identify a structure in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*—focuses on four overarching themes that give structure and coherence to the work. In his book *Logos and Civilization*, Saiedi calls these four principles (1) the removal of the sword, (2) the principle of covenant, (3) the universal revelation, and (4) the principle of heart. He then identifies

how these themes are expressed in clusters of paragraphs in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, including significant shifts at a few points in the book. Similar to the observations above about the arc of descent and arc of ascent, Saiedi identifies how the opening paragraphs provide the fundamentals of Bahá'í “metaphysics” and “social theory” and then moves into a discussion about specific laws (264). As he observes, the first specific laws revealed—obligatory prayer and fasting—are “the means of God through His Manifestation” (264), which can be associated with the dynamics of ascent.

THE CENTRALITY OF PARAGRAPH 19

Having seen the thematic coherence of paragraphs 1 through 18, one is struck by the apparent shift in paragraph 19. Only one sentence long, paragraph 19 states,

Ye have been forbidden to commit murder or adultery, or to engage in backbiting or calumny; shun ye, then, what hath been prohibited in the holy Books and Tablets.

This paragraph has not been the subject of much scholarly consideration. In popular Bahá'í discourse it is sometimes the subject of speculation about the apparent relationship Bahá'u'lláh draws between murder, adultery, and backbiting or calumny—and indeed it is often asserted that He is somehow equating these categories of wrongful acts. However, I suggest

that paragraph 19 merits much deeper exploration and analysis in terms of both its meaning and content, its pivotal place in the structure of the work, and its relationship to the rest of the work.

The transition from paragraph 18 to paragraph 19 clearly marks a shift from Bahá'u'lláh's discussion of spiritual obligations to a discussion of laws regulating human relations. Paragraph 19 is the first one, in this work, to contain prohibitions or laws that speak to the relationships between human beings and to the elements of social order.

When studying Bahá'u'lláh's writings, one must recognize that certain meta-themes and principles run throughout His teachings, and that He often made use of explicit and implicit inter-references to His other works. The need to recognize the interrelated nature of Bahá'u'lláh's writings is emphasized by the observation that Bahá'u'lláh's laws in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* cannot be read apart and in isolation from the rest of His teachings and writings. In its introduction to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Universal House of Justice highlights the importance of the reader being acquainted with the “interpretive and legislative institutions that Bahá'u'lláh has indissolubly linked with the system of law thus revealed” (3). The Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre comments that “the provisions of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* are not to be regarded as standing on their own, but rather functioning integrally within the Bahá'í system as

a whole” (Research Department). This analysis includes, for example, how certain statements in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are best understood by statements elsewhere in His Writings that give context and clarity.

When discussing prohibitions in the Bahá’í Faith, one needs to note that there is an initial prohibition, enunciated in 1863 by Bahá’u’lláh at the moment when He declared Himself a Manifestation of God, stating that “in this Revelation the use of the sword is prohibited” (cited in Saiedi 242). In a number of His writings, Bahá’u’lláh describes this prohibition both in specific and broad terms. As the statements below illustrate, this prohibition is a specific change from the laws of the Báb, a rejection of advancing Bahá’u’lláh’s Faith through force, and a broad and constructive principle of inclining our hearts toward others in positive and constructive ways:

Know thou that We have annulled the rule of the sword, as an aid to Our Cause, and substituted for it the power born of the utterance of men. Thus have We irrevocably decreed, by virtue of Our grace. Say: O people! Sow not the seeds of discord among men, and refrain from contending with your neighbour....
(*Gleanings* 303–04)

Strife and conflict befit the beasts of the wild. It was through the grace of God and with the aid of seemly words and praiseworthy

deeds that the unsheathed swords of the Bábí community were returned to their scabbards. Indeed through the power of good words, the righteous have always succeeded in winning command over the meads of the hearts of men. Say, O ye loved ones! Do not forsake prudence. Incline your hearts to the counsels given by the Most Exalted Pen and beware lest your hands or tongues cause harm unto anyone among mankind. (*Tablets* 85)

The prohibition of the sword is at once a negative statement about the use of force, coercion, and violence, and an overarching positive statement about the requirement for, and application of, the dynamics of love and unity in all aspects of life, as well as the importance of individuals seeking out knowledge and truth for themselves. It is also an explicit contrast to how previous religions have—over time and in various ways—justified or permitted the use of coercion and force to spread God’s message. Bahá’u’lláh exhorts the avoidance of conflict and contention, and the centrality of love and unity among all peoples of the world, throughout His writings:

O contending peoples and kindreds of the earth! Set your faces towards unity, and let the radiance of its light shine upon you. Gather ye together, and for the sake of God resolve to root out whatever is the source of contention

amongst you. Then will the effulgence of the world's great Luminary envelop the whole earth, and its inhabitants become the citizens of one city, and the occupants of one and the same throne. This wronged One hath, ever since the early days of His life, cherished none other desire but this, and will continue to entertain no wish except this wish. There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose. Arise and, armed with the power of faith, shatter to pieces the gods of your vain imaginings, the sowers of dissension amongst you. Cleave unto that which draweth you together and uniteth you. This, verily, is the most exalted Word which the Mother Book hath sent down and revealed unto you. To this beareth witness the Tongue of Grandeur from His habitation of glory. (*Gleanings* 217–18)

In Saiedi's analysis, the prohibition of the sword represents all of the following:

The prohibition of killing, violence, and religious coercion; the promotion of love, unity, and fellowship among peoples; the call for peace among the nations; the condemnation of militarism and of the proliferation of arms; the assertion of the necessity for education and productive employment; the condemnation of sedition; the assertion of the need for religion and social justice. (243–44)

Saiedi states that “all these are presented by Bahá'u'lláh as systematic expressions of the same underlying principle of the removal of the sword” (244).

The prohibition is at once a rejection of conflict, violence, division, oppression, and prejudice, as well as the affirmation of love, equality, justice, unity, and peace. It is the call Bahá'u'lláh makes for the construction of fundamentally new patterns of relationships for all of humanity, and for the ethic of authentic and altruistic love in its most comprehensive form.

Against the backdrop of this initial prohibition by Bahá'u'lláh, the categories of forbidden acts in paragraph 19—murder, adultery, and backbiting or calumny—can all be understood as expressions of the “sword,” or the antithesis of love and unity at different levels of human conduct and relations, and the failure to express our spiritual reality in our physical and daily lives. These acts all fundamentally do harm in different ways—they are actions

that annihilate elements of our humanity, whether our physical being, our relationships, or our nobility and integrity, and all have spiritual implications for those who perpetrate them. Murder expresses the sword through physical violence and damage to community and order, including of course, the physical annihilation of another human being. Backbiting and calumny are expressions of the sword through mind and speech—the annihilation of another person’s humanity and integrity—and at the same time are acts that devastate the soul of the perpetrator and cause disunity.⁵ Adultery expresses the sword through our interpersonal relationships and the institution of marriage, by undermining and violating the bonds of love that bind people together. At the three primary levels of our human relations with others—how we think and talk, our intimate and familial relations, and our social order and community—these acts are the antithesis of the standard to which Bahá’u’lláh calls us. They are the cause of conflict, contention, and disunity—rather than expressions of love and unity—and are acts of annihilation and destruction that have spiritual consequences.⁶

⁵ It is important to note that Bahá’u’lláh often employs the metaphor of the “sword” to refer to the human tongue.

⁶ Saiedi makes a similar observation about paragraph nineteen. He states that “we can see that what is common among all of the acts prohibited in this verse is the violation of the sanctity and dignity

From this perspective, the second half of the verse (“shun ye, then, what hath been prohibited in the holy Books and Tablets”) has a number of possible allusions. On the one hand, the reference to “holy Books” appears to indicate the sacred texts of previous religions. As Saiedi observes, “verse 19 recapitulates commandments revealed to Moses” (267). At the same time, Bahá’u’lláh’s statement might be said to hearken back to His own prohibition of the sword, and to draw an intimate connection between His prohibition at the time of His Declaration and His revelation of laws in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas a decade later. Further, the statement evokes the Bahá’í view of the fundamental relationship and essential indivisibility between all revelations of God’s word, which intimately and intrinsically connects Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation—including the Kitáb-i-Aqdas—with all previous sacred texts. As the Universal House of Justice states in its introduction, the provisions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas

rest squarely on the foundation established by past religions, for, in the words of Bahá’u’lláh, “This is the changeless Faith of God,

of the human being: murder, adultery, and backbiting involve treating human beings as inferior or as objects” (267). It should also be noted that Saiedi interprets the reference to prohibitions in paragraph nineteen as being a reference to laws and prohibitions in other religious Holy Books.

eternal in the past, eternal in the future.” In this Revelation the concepts of the past are brought to a new level of understanding, and the social laws, changed to suit the age now dawning, are designed to carry humanity forward into a world civilization the splendours of which can as yet be scarcely imagined. (1–2)

In the one sentence of paragraph 19 He has connected His laws with those of previous dispensations and reiterated the first overarching social teaching. He promulgated (the prohibition of the sword) and illustrated its expression at all levels of individual life and human relationships.

This analysis of paragraph 19 has implications for the structure of the Most Holy Book. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* was not written in the style of a comprehensive code of law. In its introduction to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Universal House of Justice writes that “in general, the laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* are stated succinctly” (7). It further states,

A word should be said about the style of language in which the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has been rendered into English. Bahá'u'lláh enjoyed a superb mastery of Arabic, and preferred to use it in those Tablets and other Writings where its precision of meaning was particularly appropriate to the exposition of basic principle. Beyond the choice of language itself, however, the

style employed is of an exalted and emotive character, immensely compelling, particularly to those familiar with the great literary tradition out of which it arose. (9)

The Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre has observed that the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has an “elliptical” style. In simple terms, this description means that Bahá'u'lláh employs a style of extreme economy in which very brief statements apparently specific in nature represent broader concepts, even an entire discourse. In the words of the Research Department, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has an “observable tendency to deal with whole areas of legislative concern by reference to a single representative example, or illustrative instance, from which conclusions can then be drawn about a range of other matters comprised within the category it represents.” A related, and equally significant observation is that the provisions of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* “must be understood according to their informing spirit, and not according to the letter of the law” (Research Department), which echoes Bahá'u'lláh's own statement in paragraph 5 that He has not revealed “a mere code of laws” but rather has “unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 5).

Paragraph 19 can be read as a prime example of this elliptical style that employs “the utmost economy of diction” (Research Department). In a single sentence, Bahá'u'lláh highlights

the fundamental teaching underlying all of His interpersonal and social laws—that they are expressions of, and should be understood as, the rejection of the sword and the call to love and unity. The “informing spirit” through all of the laws should be understood, then, as an expression of the pathway through which human beings can learn and reflect their fundamental oneness and what that means regarding how we think about, speak about, and relate to one another.

The structure of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas may now be seen in a new light. Paragraph 19 is not only a transition between Bahá'u'lláh's discussions of spiritual obligations to His discussion of laws of human relationships; indeed, the verse might be said to be, in the most concise way possible, a statement of the entirety of Bahá'u'lláh's laws regarding human relationships. It may even be suggested that the laws that are stated subsequently in the work might be understood as more specific and detailed expressions of the fundamental prohibition of the sword, and a concomitant call to love and unity at the various levels of human individual and collective life. With this orientation in mind, when trying to understand the “informing spirit” of the laws, one is oriented to look at all of them as illustrative of the overarching and fundamental dynamic of the prohibition of the sword in all of its comprehensive meanings.

There is another dimension to these observations about paragraph 19 that further illustrates the complexity,

brilliance, and subtlety of the structure of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Suggested earlier is the understanding that paragraphs 1 through 5 are a statement of the fundamental metaphysical principles of ascent and descent, including discussion of a statement on the fundamental structure of reality, the descent to the realm of the human being, through the categories of God, the Primal Will, and the Manifestation (paragraph 1), and a discussion of the concept, nature, and purpose of law (paragraphs 2 through 5). Paragraphs 6 through 18 begin the journey of ascent in the physical world by articulating the required spiritual practices fundamental for that journey. Paragraph 19, in a statement of “utmost economy of diction,” articulates in one sentence the fundamentals of Bahá'u'lláh's interpersonal and social laws. It completes the requisites for a human being on the arc of ascent by speaking to the realm of interpersonal relations and to the social dynamics of ascent.

Taken together, paragraphs 1 through 19 may be seen as complete. They articulate in multiple layers the fundamentals of the structure of reality, our spiritual reality, and the ordering of our social lives. A foundation of Bahá'u'lláh's legal universe is expressed and presented.

While highly speculative, the fact that this is completed in nineteen paragraphs may also have some significance. In the original Arabic there are no paragraph delineations in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The book is comprised

of verses numbering in the hundreds. However, the authorized translation of the work by the Universal House of Justice organizes the book into 190 paragraphs. The Arabic version released by the Universal House of Justice, while noting verses, is similarly organized into 190 paragraphs. Seemingly, the organization of verses into paragraphs in the authorized versions of the text in Arabic and English apparently reflects topical, thematic, or literary linkages between particular verses. In “Kitáb-i-Aqdas as Described and Glorified by Shoghi Effendi,” Dr. Cyrus Alai elaborates:

The original manuscript of the Aqdas, the numerous subsequent manuscript copies, and the early printed editions are in the form of a continuous text without punctuation or division into verses or paragraphs. Only later did the Persian Bahá'í scholar Ishráq-Kháverí divide the Holy Text into 463 verses, leaving out the opening phrase “In the Name of Him Who is the Supreme Ruler over all that hath been and all that is to be.”

In the English edition, the division of the Holy Text into verses has been ignored. Instead, it is divided into 190 paragraphs, each comprising of one or a few of the verses. However, there are exceptions to this rule. For example, verse 366 is divided into two sentences, forming two separate paragraphs 152 and 153 (see page

75), whereas verse 439 is split into two sentences, forming the closing sentence of paragraph 181, and the opening sentence of paragraph 182 (see page 85).

In the newly published Arabic/Persian edition—which is in the same format as the English edition—the verses are separated by the insertion of a star between them, but are not numbered. However, the number of each paragraph is noted in the margin. (23)

The number nineteen is commonly known as a “holy” number in the Bahá'í Faith, with another important symbolic number being nine. In Persian and Arabic, according to the *abjad* system, every letter has a numerical value, meaning that every letter—and thus every word—is equivalent to a number. In Arabic, the word *váhid* (meaning “unity”) has a numerical value of nineteen and symbolizes the unity of God. In the history of the Bahá'í Faith we see the number nineteen, and the connotations of unity and wholeness that it symbolizes, in a variety of ways. For example, there were eighteen “Letters of the Living” plus the Báb (nineteen). Nineteen is also the organizing principle for the Badí' calendar (established by the Báb in the Kitáb-i-Asmá and later conformed by Bahá'u'lláh), which divides the year into nineteen months of nineteen days each.

Also interesting to note is that there are 190 paragraphs in the

Kitáb-i-Aqdas in total. After this first unit is counted, the total remaining paragraphs equal 171, or nineteen times nine. The first nineteen paragraphs may be viewed as a complete unit, a *váhid*, that are then expounded upon in the number of paragraphs equivalent to the multiplication of the two numbers of the Baha'i Faith that have important symbolic meaning.

Viewing paragraphs one through nineteen as a unit suggests that aspects of the rest of the work might be read as elucidating or expressing different elements and aspects of the first nineteen paragraphs. These range from mystical and spiritual exhortations about the nature of God, the Manifestation, and humanity, to various individual, interpersonal, and social laws, to calls to Kings and Rulers to play their role in expressing the principles of recognition and obedience, as well as manifesting the dynamics of unity in the domain of social order.

CONCLUSION

While the reflections shared in this paper are clearly speculative in nature, they are hopefully illustrative of the utility of exploring and seeking to understand the elements of structure in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Assuming that the book does not have a discernible structure, or is mirroring the *Qur'án* in its structure, potentially pre-defines or limits insights we may gain from study of the work. At the same time, care must be taken not to impose a rigid or fixed structure on the book.

Bahá'u'lláh was clear in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* that one should strive to read and understand it from its own context and terms of reference:

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.
(99)

As this paper has sought to demonstrate, there are many potential layers of meaning to understanding the structure of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, and it will take extensive further work and examination to comprehend them. Through further developing our understanding and discourse around structure, our ability to read this complex book will advance, and with it may come new insights and understandings into the nature and operation of Bahá'í law.

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