

# Book Review

*Revelation and Social Reality: Learning to Translate What Is Written into Reality.* By Paul Lample. West Palm Beach, Florida: Palabra Publications, 2009, viii + 294 pages, including references, notes, and index.

KENNETH E. BOWERS

The importance of a book can be judged as much by its timing as by its content. One thinks, for example, of the generally acknowledged effect of Uncle Tom's Cabin in accelerating processes that culminated in the American Civil War. In the growth and development of the Bahá'í Faith thus far, one might well consider *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, the first truly comprehensive and scholarly introduction to the history and teachings of the new Revelation, as having come at just the right moment, as the community entered years of unprecedented efforts in teaching and proclamation. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine a book more aptly suited to the present period in the Faith's evolution than this most recent work by Paul Lample.

Mr. Lample's objective is to explore both the interaction of humanity with the word of God and the processes by which divine revelation achieves the aim—as described by Bahá'u'lláh—“to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 240). Mr. Lample illustrates how these processes have shaped the historical experience of the Bahá'í world community, placing emphasis on developments since the global adoption of the institute training process in 1996. He then relates both the processes and experience to certain trends in current philosophical discourse.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, consisting of four chapters, addresses how the revelation of God effects social transformation; how the Bahá'í community engages in the process of translating “what is

written into reality” through action guided by the revealed word of Bahá'u'lláh and protected by the elucidations of His designated Interpreters and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice; how the Bahá'í community's collective understanding and practice evolved in relation to expansion and consolidation during the decade beginning in 1996; and how these same principles apply to the community's efforts to contribute to the advancement of civilization.

The second part, consisting of two chapters, correlates the picture drawn in the first part with certain aspects of contemporary thought—particularly the problematic issues of knowledge and power. Mr. Lample makes it clear that he is neither offering a thorough analysis of these issues nor attempting a comprehensive treatment of current philosophical trends. He aims instead to deal briefly with various criticisms that might be aimed at the Faith by those who consider its approaches and concepts either naive or coercive.

In developing his theme, Mr. Lample draws on an unusual and varied career of service to the Bahá'í Faith at all levels—local, national, and international. A current member of the Universal House of Justice, he previously served as a Counselor member of the International Teaching Center and in the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Center. In addition, before settling in Haifa in 1994, Mr. Lample had been a member of the National Teaching Committee serving the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, a staff member of the U.S. Bahá'í National Center in several capacities, and a founder of the Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Training Institute in Florida. In each of these arenas of service, he was intensely active as a teacher, scholar, and administrator—a rich combination of experiences that equipped him well for the task he set for himself in writing this book.

The quality of Mr. Lample's writing reflects the years of development that preceded the book's publication, throughout which various themes touched on in the book were explored in a variety of papers, talks, and courses he delivered. The result is a concise presentation in which a great many ideas are explored, correlated, and examined in the light of the authoritative sacred and interpretive texts of the Faith. Of a depth too

profound to be accessible by scanning, it is a book that invites close and thoughtful reading.

While every chapter of the book has value, many readers will find especially rewarding those that deal with the Bahá'í community's experiences since 1996 in advancing the Faith's successive worldwide teaching plans and contributing to the onward march of world civilization. Here the reader will find an unusually cogent analysis of the community's collective learning during this critical period in its history—a period characterized by the emergence among its members of a new level of consciousness. By beginning to grasp the implications of their role as builders of a new world order based on Bahá'í teachings, by gradually applying the principles and discipline necessary for systematic progress, and by establishing in the community patterns of activity signifying increased capacity to reflect Bahá'u'lláh's will and purpose, Bahá'ís augmented the community's knowledge and experience of processes necessary to the eventual “entry by troops” into the Faith—portending prodigious things to come.

The perspective of the majority of Bahá'ís is naturally formed by experience in their own local communities. Valuable as it is, especially for those who are actively involved in the Plans, such a perspective can be greatly enhanced when a global viewpoint is offered, and when worldwide developments in the community are analyzed in the light of the voluminous guidance of the Universal House of Justice. It was for this reason more than any other that the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States selected this book as the basis for special courses to be delivered in all of its seasonal and permanent schools in 2010, hopeful that such study would help the friends to better understand the needs of the Faith and to be better prepared for the next Plan—to be launched in 2011.

The very nature of the processes under examination in this book demand that it not be definitive in tone. Indeed, Mr. Lample acknowledges at the very outset that

Bahá'í intellectual life is still in its earliest stages. Struggles, misunderstandings, and problems arise—but these are birth pangs, not a hardening of the arteries. This book offers an approach to Bahá'í

thought and action that avoids the extremes of absolute certainty or skepticism while accommodating faith and critical thought. Within the limits of human capacity, we can learn, little by little, day by day, to grasp the intended meaning and aim of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and contribute to the transformation of social reality for the well-being and unity of all." (vii)

Mr. Lample lives up to his promise much as would a veteran explorer surveying the shores of a great and unknown continent and inviting others to share in the wonder and adventure of its discovery.

#### WORK CITED

Bahá'u'lláh. *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950.