



Book Reviews

Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2025.

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The publication of *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* marks a significant contribution to Bahá'í studies. In this broad-ranging, detailed volume, Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai have begun to address a longstanding gap in Bahá'í studies: the creation of an extensive, accessible, clearly articulated, carefully structured, and meticulously researched academic introduction to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Mother-Book and the Most Holy Book of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, the charter of the future

world civilization, and the legislative nucleus of the Bahá'í Faith. By synthesizing available scholarship, textual exegesis, and historical analysis, the authors have provided a foundational reference work and study guide to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that will serve both academics and general readers.

OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

Ghaemmaghami and Vafai state their objective unambiguously in the Preface: to explore “the Kitáb-i-Aqdas’s most consequential provisions” and present an account that is “textual” rather than “anthropological or sociological” (xviii)—one that lays a foundation for systematic study of the Book’s history, language, laws, and theological framework. They seek to synthesize and clarify rather than to exhaustively analyze every ordinance, and focus instead on the overarching features and themes that give the Kitáb-i-Aqdas its distinctive structure and meaning. Their declared objective is deliberately circumscribed, though the scope and depth of execution extend well beyond a minimal exposition.

METHODOLOGY

The authors define their book as, first, expository and, second, analytical, to the extent that space allowed. They establish a broad foundation and analytical framework for more focused and specialized scholarship to follow.

To this end, the authors employ a systematic, textual-historical

methodology that is primarily expository in nature. Their approach involves providing a structured framework for approaching the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* by history, language, theology, and legal classifications; citing heavily from primary Bahá'í and related scriptural sources; and applying rigorous scholarly analysis to specific textual elements to facilitate understanding of the text. While it is not a pure work of novel analysis, in that it is not an exploration of a single new theoretical argument, the authors' do rigorously apply analytical tools to the source material, such as textual and comparative analysis, literary and stylistic analysis, systematic categorization of complex concepts to facilitate rigorous study and discussion, and historical analysis. Their heavy reliance on primary Bahá'í texts to support their analysis allows readers to assess their conclusions.

THEME AND THESIS

At its core, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* examines Revelation as law in the service of spiritual and ethical transformation and as the juridical and moral architecture of a global religious order. The unifying theme of the study is the integration of the spiritual and the social—that Bahá'u'lláh did not intend to promulgate “a mere code of laws” but to awaken “divine perfections in all human souls” (7), and that His Most Holy Book transforms the idea of divine legislation into a universal ethical and spiritual framework.

By situating the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*

within Bahá'u'lláh's broader Revelation, Ghaemmaghami and Vafai present the Most Holy Book not simply as a legal corpus but as the textual cornerstone of the Bahá'í Dispensation—a Book that articulates the theological, metaphysical, moral, and institutional foundations of a global faith. This approach captures the essence of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* as a living document that continues to shape the practices, discourses, doctrines, texts, institutions, and experiences of the Bahá'í community.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

After a short introductory chapter on the Bahá'í Faith that orients non-specialist readers, Chapter 1 traces the history of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: its anticipation, composition, dissemination, early manuscripts, and publication. The inclusion of rare images—such as the Bassett manuscript, an early transcription by Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, and the 1891 Bombay publication—makes this chapter a concentrated documentary resource on the history of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (53–58). This chapter synthesizes an impressive range of sources—published or out of print—pertaining to the history of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, and is replete with new historical findings. Among its most significant contributions is the authors' refinement of the date of the completion of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* to early January 1873, based on close internal textual analysis and contemporaneous Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh (23–27). The chapter's

exploration of the Bassett Manuscript held at Columbia University, which the authors identify as the earliest known Bahá'í Text accessioned by a research library in the United States and as material evidence for the circulation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in Persia by 1877, is noteworthy (pp. 32–34). In addition, the authors revisit the 1891 Bombay edition, correct the historical record through a careful reading of its “*Khatt-i-Badí*” colophon, and identify the scribe as Mírzá Ḥusayn-i-*Khurtúmi* rather than the commonly cited Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí (37–39).

Further, Ghaemmaghami and Vafai present compelling evidence showing that “Questions and Answers” appears to have been completed shortly before Bahá'u'lláh's passing in 1892. While most previous accounts suggest the work was a compilation exclusively of questions posed in writing by Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, and one indicates that it was written in the early years of Bahá'u'lláh's exile in ‘Akká and completed by 1873, this chapter offers a much more nuanced historical reconstruction, and provides new insights of great interest to the field of Bahá'í studies (45–49).

Chapter 2 offers an erudite exploration of the language, style, and translation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. The authors analyze its elliptical Arabic prose, its referential density, and its stylistic nonlinearity (69–74). They also provide the most complete account yet of the English translation process—from early unofficial attempts, through Shoghi Effendi's translation of selected

passages, to the intentional delay and eventual release of the authorized translation in 1992 (78–92). This discussion will be of particular value to scholars of translation studies and scripture alike, as it reveals how Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice approached the formidable challenge of rendering Bahá'u'lláh's dense and allusive Arabic into accessible and dignified English. The authors' sophisticated analysis of the grammar of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is novel. They argue that Bahá'u'lláh's deviations from standard Arabic rules in early manuscripts were deliberate “speech acts” to assert divine authority, which were standardized in later recensions (63–65). An important discussion is the comparative analysis of paragraph 181 that demonstrates how Shoghi Effendi's translation contains a significant interpretive element regarding the “new World Order” that is not immediately apparent in the literal Arabic (91–92).

Subsequent chapters move thematically through the theological foundations of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, its anthropological underpinnings, the Covenant, devotion, ethics, family law, community institutions, and the principles of unity and justice. Chapter 3, on theological foundations, examines the central metaphysical premise of Bahá'í Revelation and explains how the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* articulates a Bahá'í theology in which the Manifestation of God functions as the perfect locus of divine Revelation and the sole epistemic path to the knowledge of God. By centering the discussion on the Manifestation of

God as the core theme of the future Bahá'í theology, cosmology, epistemology, eschatology, and ethics, the authors address and resolve some of the misunderstandings that can arise from human efforts to grapple with the paradoxes involved in recognizing God, Whose absolute transcendence sits in tension with the human purpose of attaining His presence. They also speak to the tendency of some to conflate the Essence of God, His names and attributes, and their reflections in the world of creation. The authors' rigorous exploration of the concept of the Manifestation of God also sheds light on complex doctrinal topics like the "Seal of the Prophets" and the "Day of Resurrection". This chapter clearly illustrates how the theological framework of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* specifically and the Bahá'í Faith broadly revolutionizes the conceptual scope of Revelation previously found in older religious traditions. The exploration culminates in Section F, "Relationship among the Manifestations and Claims of Exclusivity and Finality," which provides a unifying understanding that resolves claims of religious finality and offers a novel contribution to religious discourse.

Chapter 4 examines the Bahá'í conception of human ontology—body, mind, and soul; higher and lower natures; purpose and spiritual duties—and outlines the soul's continual progress in this world and the next. Chapter 5 analyzes the explicit provisions in *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* for succession, authoritative interpretation, and institutional

governance, and demonstrates how these structures safeguard unity and doctrinal integrity in the Bahá'í community. In this regard, the discussion of the anticipation, in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, of the institution of Guardianship before its formal establishment in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament, as well as the possibility of a break in the line of the Guardians, is noteworthy (177–181).

Chapter 6 surveys the spiritual disciplines mandated in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*—obligatory prayer, fasting, recitation, meditation, immersion in scripture, and pilgrimage—and explains their individual purposes, history, and modes of observance. A special highlight, which offers entirely novel and compelling research, is the detailed history of the evolution of the Bahá'í law of obligatory prayer. The authors provide a fascinating reconstruction of the three distinct periods in which Bahá'u'lláh prescribed different sets of obligatory prayers. They explore why Bahá'u'lláh composed two obligatory prayers which He never disclosed and then replaced them with a third set of prayers (202–205).

Chapter 7 describes the ethical vision of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* by analyzing its injunctions to cultivate specific virtues and adhere to laws that promote moral refinement, purity, and the embodiment of divine attributes. We again find wholly original textual analysis in this chapter, pertaining in this case to the prohibition of opium, whose repetition in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (¶155 and ¶190) is explored (257–259). While

some have observed that the last paragraph of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (§190) proscribing opium seems to repeat an already existing proscription in the Text (§155) and, further, that paragraph 190 is missing from some manuscripts of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the authors have explored both when paragraph 190 was likely added to the Text and, more importantly, why it was added. They suggest that Paragraph 190 was a later addition to the Text owing to the increase in opium production and use, especially in the 1870s and 1880s in Persia, and intended to address the specific shift from eating to smoking opium in nineteenth-century Persia (257–259).

Chapter 8 outlines the Bahá'í laws governing family life, marriage and divorce, rites of burial, and the distribution of estates. This chapter provides a novel interpretation of the intestacy laws. It argues that the “House of Justice” designated as the residuary beneficiary refers specifically to the *Local* House of Justice, not the Universal House of Justice. The authors support this interpretation by correlating it with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s teachings on the “general storehouse” and a 1932 codification of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*’s laws of personal status prepared by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Egypt (293–294).

Chapter 9 explores the communal dimensions of Bahá'í law and analyzes how provisions related to education, consultation, worship, and institutional life contribute to the development of a spiritually oriented and

socially cohesive community. Chapter 10 explores key teachings of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* that promote, foster and operationalize unity at the interpersonal, communal, and societal levels. This chapter provides an important analysis of the prohibitions on slavery and “uncleanness,” or ritual impurity—two revolutionary provisions within the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* without parallel in previous main Scriptures, including the *Bayán*. The authors present powerful arguments here that the explicit abolition of slavery in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* represents a definitive moral and legal break from the past and elevates the inherent dignity of the human being (348–350). Ghaemmaghami and Vafai also discuss that by abolishing the concept of ritual uncleanness—an idea prevalent in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* dismantles the primary psychological and social obstacles to interreligious fellowship and global integration (344–346). The presence of such unprecedented provisions highlights why the Most Holy Book demands rigorous study by both students and scholars of religion, as it articulates a unique legislative and ethical paradigm designed to facilitate the transition to a unified world civilization.

Chapter 11 discusses the approach of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* to justice, including its moral principles, its administrative implications, and its vision for an ordered society governed by institutions dedicated to justice and welfare. Finally, Chapter 12 situates the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* within the

context of Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers of the world and contextualizes its summonses as the culmination of a process that began in Constantinople and Adrianople. The authors bring together, in a single study, all available historical information on the major proclamatory Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh—their chronology, circumstances of revelation, modes of delivery, and early dissemination. This chapter provides detailed evidence about their chronology and analyzes the thematic architecture of these Tablets.

EXECUTION AND ACHIEVEMENT

Ghaemmaghani and Vafai effectively achieve their declared goal. Their treatment is exhaustive, analytical, and interpretive. They strike a careful balance between academic rigor and devotional sensitivity, a balance that is not always achieved in the study of religious texts. Every chapter demonstrates the authors' mastery of both primary Bahá'í Texts and secondary scholarship in multiple languages. The clarity of their citations and the scrupulousness of their documentation exemplify a high standard of scholarship in Bahá'í textual studies.

The achievement of the authors lies not only in what they include but in how they organize and interpret it. Equally impressive is their engagement with the hermeneutic implications of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. By emphasizing Bahá'u'lláh's fusion of law and spirituality, for instance, they implicitly address one of the central

questions in Bahá'í hermeneutics: how can divine law be both obligatory and liberating? Their answer—rooted in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion that “His laws all grant liberation rather than restriction”—presents the Kitáb-i-Aqdas as a framework cultivating and empowering human capacities rather than a set of confining legal prescriptions (369–371). This interpretive stance renders their study relevant not only to researchers in Bahá'í studies but also to students of comparative religion and moral philosophy.

INTELLECTUAL MERIT

In addition to the many contributions already noted, this work catalogues every known reference, study, and commentary—Persian, Arabic, and Western—pertaining to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, creating a bibliographic repository of remarkable depth and range, unmatched in scope within the existing field of Bahá'í studies.

Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas lays the groundwork for future scholarship on this critical topic in Bahá'í studies. While the volume is exhaustive in its internal textual analysis, it naturally leaves room for further research that engages more deeply with external contexts. Scholars interested in placing the legal principles of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in dialogue with broader theories of comparative law or postcolonial religious studies, or in exploring the socio-historical question of how the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas have been practically applied by Bahá'í communities

since its revelation, will find this work invaluable.

More broadly, the book sets a benchmark for the academic study of Bahá'í scripture. The authors' methodology engages the full corpus of primary texts, manuscripts, and authoritative editions; is informed by careful integration of the relevant secondary scholarship; and is characterized by meticulous attention to language, terminology, and textual precision. This can serve as a model for future studies of other best-known works of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

This book advances Bahá'í scholarship on several important fronts. Perhaps most notably, although a number of valuable introductory works on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are available, this is the first published by a prominent academic press in the English-speaking world; as such, it is positioned to reach an audience beyond the Bahá'í community.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is likely to remain a primary introduction and study guide to Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book for years to come. It is both the culmination of prior scholarship and the foundation for future enquiry. In scope and execution, it is a significant reference work that helps transform the study of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation from scattered commentary into systematic understanding.

By unveiling the historical circumstances of the revelation of the

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the evolution of its manuscripts, its publication, circulation, and translation, the intricacies of its style and language, the philosophy and implications of its laws, and the nature and significance of its summonses, Ghaemmaghami and Vafai have done more than provide an introduction to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas; they have illuminated the intellectual and spiritual architecture of the Bahá'í Dispensation itself. Their book is a scholarly and devotional landmark; it is a testament to the increasing maturity of Bahá'í studies and an indispensable aid for those engaged in the serious study of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.