

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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In 2003 Udo Schaefer, a preeminent scholar of Bahá'í law, commented in an article published in *The Journal of Law and Religion* that “it is remarkable” that, with only a few exceptions, the subject of Bahá'í law “has not yet been taken up in the generally much more abundant literature [on the Bahá'í Faith] published in English.” He further noted that he had no choice but to cite his own academic work in the article “for the simple reason that other relevant academic literature on this subject scarcely exists” (308).

Schaefer's seeming incredulity at the lack of scholarship on Bahá'í law is understandable given the central place of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in the Bahá'í canon. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, while many things at once, is also fundamentally a book of laws, intended to “build anew the whole world” (1) as the “Charter of the future world civilization” (1–2).

In the years since Schaefer's observations—which came eleven years after the release of the official English translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in 1992—some growth in scholarship on Bahá'í law has taken

place.<sup>1</sup> It remains true, however, that the study of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and its legal contents, does not hold a central place in the current culture or practice of Bahá'í studies.

In *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith* Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai aim to help fill some of this gap. The authors undertake one of the most comprehensive studies of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in English to date, setting out to describe “the Kitáb-i-Aqdas's overarching features and themes—its history and style; theological foundations; institutional, devotional, personal, and community provisions; teachings and perspectives on unity, justice, and law; and messages to political and religious leaders” (xviii).

*Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* achieves this ambitious and daunting goal. Students and scholars of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as the Bahá'í community generally, will benefit greatly from the depth of information and analysis provided by the authors, and their mastery of the subject-matter.

Structured in twelve chapters, the book's focus flows logically from the contextual to the textual. The first five chapters, which are more contextual in focus, are especially valuable. They address the history of the text (Chapter 1) and its language and style (Chapter 2),

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1 For an overview of the development of English language scholarship on Bahá'í law see, Roshan Danesh, “Themes in the Study of Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Emerging Approaches to Scholarship on Bahá'í Law.”

the core teachings of the Bahá'í Faith on theology (Chapter 3) and human nature and purpose (Chapter 4), and the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh (Chapter 5). While many of these topics are directly discussed in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* itself, these chapters position that Book within the universe of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and writings, while also referencing Islamic, Bábí, and other relevant influences and roots.

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is a notoriously challenging text that is difficult to approach. One of the reasons for this is its dual character: it exists both within historical time, and, as revealed scripture, outside of it. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is deeply embedded within and comments upon the cultural, social, and religious milieu within which it was revealed. At the same time, it is explicitly seeking to articulate Bahá'u'lláh's eternal and universal teachings, and the aspirational vision of a distant future. For many readers, this dual aspect of the text has an element of dissonance: we must struggle to identify clearly the connection between Bahá'u'lláh's references to the world He lived within and the world He says must be created.

Ghaemmaghami and Vafai thus do a tremendous service for readers in these early chapters by providing invaluable contextual information about the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Much of this information will be new for English readers, and certainly for those who are not students of Islam.

For example, discussion of the stylistic elements of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, including Bahá'u'lláh's Arabic, as well

as nonlinearity, the elliptical mode of legal expression, and various literary devices, will help readers gain insight into why Bahá'u'lláh may be stating a given point in a certain way, and appreciate the layers of meaning they may have to seek out (Chapter 2). Similarly, the extensive discussion of the Bahá'í concept of human nature provides a vital lens for the reader seeking to understand their own relationship to the laws in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Chapter 4). In this regard, the extensive discussion of the opening paragraph of the book and the "twin duties" to recognize Bahá'u'lláh and to "observe every ordinance" He revealed provides a guiding entry point for the reader into connecting the Bahá'í concept of human nature with the Bahá'í approach to law (142–56).

The remaining seven chapters are generally more textual in focus. Many of these chapters are more explicitly organized around paragraphs of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, and how those paragraphs may be categorized. Chapters 6–9 are structured around categories of laws, chapters 10 and 11 are structured around legal concepts or themes, and chapter 12 is focused on Bahá'u'lláh's messages to kings and rulers that are included in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.

The strength of this part of the book is its comprehensive approach to the text: it seeks to account for the full contents of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. This approach helps the reader find a path through the text, including by connecting those paragraphs that may initially appear disconnected in the unique and

challenging flow and structure of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. For many readers, this part of the book will be an invaluable resource as they seek to deepen their reading and understanding of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

In places, the structure of these later chapters reflects some of the complexities and challenges involved in writing about the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. For example, while it makes sense to have chapters focused on “Personal Devotional Laws: Prayer, Fasting, and Other Practices” (Chapter 6) and “Laws Related to Personal Status and Death: Marriage, Divorce, Burial, and Inheritance” (Chapter 8), the organization of some other chapters is puzzling. Another example, is how the inclusion of consultation in Chapter 9 on “Community Laws: Education, Consultation, the Calendar, the Feast, and the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar” could be questioned: consultation applies to all facets of an individual's life, and not just as a “community” law. It is also unclear why other areas of law, such as those related to the administrative order or community safety, are not included in this category.

Similarly, the decision to have discrete chapters on chapters “Unity: Vision and Provisions” (Chapter 10) and “Justice and Law: Principles and Administration” (Chapter 11) could give the impression that the Bahá'í teachings of unity and justice are primarily related to the areas of law discussed in those chapters. This is a difficult assertion to maintain given the centrality of both unity and justice to

the Bahá'í teachings and worldview. Indeed, one could make a case that a chapter on unity should be the conceptual framing for *all* areas of Bahá'í law, and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas as whole, given the centrality of unity to Bahá'í theology, ontology and philosophy. Granted, the authors focus in Chapter 10 on the specific concept of the unity of “humankind”— but this then raises other questions, such as whether consultation, which is central to the creation and maintenance of social unity, should also be discussed in this chapter.

There are examples of other approaches to the categorization of the legal content of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that may have been helpful to consider and draw on more explicitly, even if they were not ultimately followed. For example, the Universal House of Justice states:

As to the laws themselves, a careful scrutiny discloses that they govern three areas: the individual's relationship to God, physical and spiritual matters which benefit the individual directly, and relations among individuals and between the individual and society. They can be grouped under the following headings: prayer and fasting; laws of personal status governing marriage, divorce and inheritance; a range of other laws, ordinances and prohibitions, as well as exhortations; and the abrogation of specific laws and ordinances of previous Dispensations. (“Introduction” in Kitáb-i-Aqdas 4)

Scholars, such as Schaefer, have also presented categorizations of the legal content of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that are more specific and detailed.

One area of exploration that would have benefited from an expanded discussion by the authors is the Bahá'í concept of law itself—a subject that has been the subject of some focus in the secondary literature. This literature has included debates, and concerns, about the dangers of taken-for-granted assumptions about what is meant by the term “law” in the Bahá'í conception, including a facile understanding of Bahá'í law as a set of rules.

While the authors do helpfully touch on a number of aspects of this discussion, it is also somewhat left aside as beyond the scope of their stated project. One result of this is that in some areas where a reader might perceive surface inconsistencies, tensions, or even explicit conflicts in Bahá'í law or teachings—such as those regarding gender equality, sexual orientation, or gender identity—not much new insight or ground is covered. Seeking to develop coherent understandings of these topics, and addressing the apparent dissonance that exists in Bahá'u'lláh's writings to discover ways in which the apparent tensions can be reconciled, is not possible without diving deeper into the Bahá'í concept of law itself. Nonetheless, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* strengthens the foundation of scholarship upon which future inquiries into these important questions can be built.

A last challenge with the book—which is no fault of the authors—is that like much academic literature on the Bahá'í Faith, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* will struggle, because of its cost, with being accessible. It would be a tremendous mistake if this important book does not find its way to being read, studied, and used by Bahá'í institutions, communities, and individuals. It is hoped that ways will be found to promote and disseminate this work so that the advances in Bahá'í scholarship it makes can be widely appreciated, understood, and built upon.

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