

## Prolegomena to a Bahá'í Theology

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### Abstract

Theology is intrinsic to the Bahá'í revelation. While community attitudes have tended to view the discipline of theology somewhat suspiciously, the term and field of "Bahá'í theology" remain valid and are indispensable. One can distinguish source theology or revelation theology, contained in holy writ, from derivative theology (commentary), which is more relative and subjective. The relativity of religious truth, while it plays a useful role in deabsolutizing dogmatism and in promoting interreligious dialogue, is itself relative and currently runs the risk of becoming another absolute. Bahá'í theology is both apophatic (negative) and cataphatic (affirmative). An abstruse, apophatic negative theology of a hidden God is explicit as background to Bahá'í theology. Apophasis rejects defining God and honors God by remaining silent about the divine essence. If apophasis does speak of God, it does so by *via negativa*, by describing God through a process of elimination of what God is not, rather than making affirmations about what God is. The main substance of Bahá'í theology, however, is manifestation theology or theophanology, that is, a theology calculated upon an understanding of the metaphysical reality and teachings of the divine Manifestation. This manifestation theology is cataphatic. Cataphasis dares to speak about God but recognizes that God transcends the human analogies used to describe divinity. Bahá'í theology is, moreover, based in faith rooted in the person of Bahá'u'lláh and his divine revelation, has a strong metaphysical bias, eschews dogmatism, and welcomes diversity.

### Résumé

La théologie fait partie intégrante de la révélation bahá'íe. Si, dans la communauté bahá'íe, on a tendance à envisager la théologie avec méfiance, l'expression «théologie bahá'íe» et le domaine même sont pourtant bien valables et indispensables. On peut établir une distinction entre la théologie de la révélation qui porte sur les Écritures (*source theology/revelation theology*) et la théologie sous forme de commentaires, la théologie dérivée (*derivative theology/commentary*), qui est plus relative et subjective. Si la relativité de la vérité religieuse est utile parce qu'elle permet de se distancier du dogmatisme et de favoriser le dialogue entre les religions, cette relativité est elle-même relative et elle court le risque, à l'heure actuelle, de devenir un autre absolu. La théologie bahá'íe est à la fois apophasique et cataphatique. La théologie abstruse, apophasique et négative d'un Dieu caché existe en toile de fond à la théologie bahá'íe. La théologie apophasique rejette toute définition de Dieu et, par respect envers Lui, n'aborde pas la question de l'essence divine; si elle le fait, elle procède *via negativa*, en disant ce qu'Il n'est pas et non en affirmant ce qu'Il est. Par contre, la théologie bahá'íe est essentiellement une théologie de la manifestation ou théophanologie, c'est à dire une théologie qui repose sur la compréhension de la réalité métaphysique de la Manifestation divine et de Ses enseignements. Une telle théologie est cataphatique en ce sens qu'elle ose parler de Dieu tout en reconnaissant qu'Il transcende les analogies que l'homme utilise pour Le décrire. De plus, la théologie bahá'íe repose sur la foi en la personne de Bahá'u'lláh et en Sa révélation divine, elle possède une forte orientation métaphysique, rejette le dogmatisme et accueille la diversité.

### Resumen

La teología es intrínseca a la revelación bahá'í. A la vez que el modo de pensar del público demuestra tendencia de mirar con cierta sospecha la disciplina de la teología, la expresión y el campo de "La teología bahá'í" mantienen su validez y son indispensables. Se puede distinguir la teología originaria, es decir teología reveladora contenida en la Sagrada Escritura, a la teología derivativa (comentario), que resulta más relativa y subjetiva. La relatividad de la verdad religiosa, no obstante de desempeñar un papel importante en apartar lo categórico en lo dogmático y en la promoción de diálogos interreligiosos, es por sí misma relativa, corriendo por lo tanto el riesgo de tornarse en un nuevo absoluto. La teología bahá'í es tanto apofática (negativa) como catafática (afirmativa). Explícito como fondo a la teología bahá'í está la teología apofática, negativa y abstrusa de un Dios oculto antes de su manifestación. La apofática rechaza definir a Dios y rinde homenaje a Dios, lo guardando silencio respecto a la esencia divina. Si la apofática se atreve a hablar de Dios, lo hace por la vía negativa, calificando a Dios mediante proceso de eliminación de lo que no es, en vez de afirmaciones referentes a lo que es. La esencia principal de la teología bahá'í es la teología de manifestación o la teofanología, es decir, una teología calculada con base en la comprensión de la realidad metafísica y de las enseñanzas de la Manifestación divina. Esta teología de manifestación es catafática. La catafática se atreve a hablar de Dios pero reconoce que Dios está más allá de las analogías humanas utilizadas para calificar la divinidad. Es más, la teología bahá'í está basada en una fe arraigada en la persona de Bahá'u'lláh y Su revelación divina, tiene fuerte orientación metafísica, se abstiene de dogmatismo, y abraza la diversidad.

O thou who assumest the voice of knowledge! This Cause is too evident to be obscured, and too conspicuous to be concealed. It shineth as the sun in its meridian glory.  
—Bahá'u'lláh

Ninety years ago, Cambridge Orientalist E.G. Browne wrote that during his stay in Persia in 1887–88 among the “Behá’í Bábis,” their religion consisted mainly of listening to tablets (*alwáh*) (Browne, Introduction to Phelps, *Abbas Effendi* xxv). Bábí-Bahá’í teachings were “varying and unfixed,” he noted, and contained little doctrine “touching on questions of Metaphysics, Ontology, or Eschatology” (Browne, Introduction to Phelps, *Abbas Effendi* xxv-xxvi).<sup>1</sup> While the subsequent decades witnessed a proliferation in the translation of Bahá’í sacred scripture which have dealt precisely with many of Browne’s concerns, only recently have we begun to witness the emergence of Bahá’í theology per se. The last two decades of the twentieth century particularly have witnessed a gradual but significant increase in scholarly writings treating diverse themes in Bahá’í theology and metaphysics. Bahá’í theologian Udo Schaefer finds, nonetheless, that compared with Islam, which by its mid-second century had already founded its four schools of law,<sup>2</sup> Bahá’í research has thus far focused mainly on history and has produced, with some notable exceptions, little “on the metaphysical and theological aspects of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation,” which Schaefer maintains are “at the core of a religion” (“Challenges” 26).<sup>3</sup> Whatever speculation may exist about the causes for the lag in the development of Bahá’í theology, a consciousness seems to have finally crystalized around the vital necessity to foster the growth of the scholarly exploration of the specifically religious teachings of the Bahá’í Faith.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá exhorted the Bahá’ís to “the advancement of all branches of knowledge” which he said was “a fixed and vital principle . . .” (*Bahá’í Education: A Compilation* 39).<sup>4</sup> This exhortation would naturally include sacred study. We still find, however, that basic Bahá’í teachings such as the nature of Bahá’í ethics, progressive revelation, the fundamental unity of the world religions, and the implications of the old and difficult question of “the one and the many,”<sup>5</sup> which still persists in the Bahá’í Faith as “unity in diversity,” are just some of the teachings that have received little in-depth treatment in Bahá’í scholarship, a situation that promises to be temporary.<sup>6</sup> One also looks forward to the development of a systematic theology (since Bahá’í theology consists thus far mainly of piecemeal themes) and to a “world theology,”<sup>7</sup> as well as to more existential and holistic approaches to the field.

This article takes a broad overview of the question of “Bahá’í theology,” and has two basic objectives: (1) to address the more preliminary question of the concept and validity of Bahá’í theology<sup>8</sup> per se; and (2) to help clear the ground—a process already under way—for the more in-depth examination of a few selected themes.

These two basic objectives will be met more specifically by defining Bahá’í theology through a discussion of terminology, the relativity of religious truth, manifestation and negative theology, and elements of Bahá’í cosmology. These questions lie at diverse points on the theological spectrum and, other than Bahá’í theology itself, are not tied together by any one extended theme. It should be understood that any ideas about Bahá’í theology are put forward here as tentative theories only and are obviously not meant to be binding on anyone, including the author.

### **Defining Bahá’í Theology**

There are possibly two great dangers of any theology. Bahá’í derivative theology (commentary) would be no exception. One is the risk of idolatry, meant here in the Judaic sense of absolutizing or worshipping anything but God. The intellectual pursuit of theology, whose object is the understanding of the divine milieu,<sup>9</sup> always runs the risk of becoming a substitute for the truth, revelation, and the spiritual life, which are all its prime purpose. Following the idolatry leitmotif, Paula A. Drewek cautions against the danger of idolatry when discussing theology:

Any “God-talk” is prone to idolatry. In discussing forms of God, we had better be cognizant of potential dangers.... The images or forms of God cannot be confused with the truth they are intended to convey; the vehicle is not the essence. (“Divine Spirit and Form” 2)<sup>10</sup>

In other words, theology is not an end in itself. It should always focus on a clearer understanding of the teachings of the revelation, its concepts, and the existential human condition. The epitome of the absolutization of theology is historically exemplified by the rejection of the Manifestations of God by theologians. Here we have the supreme tragic irony and paradox of history. The divine Teacher who is the origin of all theology is rejected by the wayward pupils. The second danger is that theology become a tool of contention. Theology in Bahá’í perspective is open to accepting a congenial diversity of views on the divine milieu, of “letting a thousand flowers bloom.”<sup>11</sup>

Theology in the past has been not only an instrument of sectarianism but also a powerful tool of repression and warfare. Christ's condemnation of the Jewish parties of his time, "Ye blind guides which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:24) indicates how theologians can lose perspective and trivialize the pursuit of the truth, or tempt us to encompass and define doctrines that are beyond our intellectual capacity to define. The Universal House of Justice has alluded to the same difficulty:

In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God's Revelation were overanxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was beyond their power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would make comprehensible, to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary. Such compromises with essential truth, such intellectual pride, we must scrupulously avoid. (*Wellspring of Guidance* 87–88)

Like an open window, theology must let in not only statements of truth but also the spirit of life. It must liberate and somehow contribute to the wholeness of human life. Further, theology must always be subordinate to revelation, whose purpose it is to elucidate. The great medievalist Etienne Gilson (1884–1978) was conscious of this danger of allowing theology to become a substitute for revelation. Referring to Karl Barth, the systematic theologian of church dogmatics whose purpose it was to purify liberal Protestant theology from all natural theology,<sup>12</sup> Gilson wrote about the all-too-human tendency to ignore the divine Word and to idolize its interpreter:

We all know how energetically he [Barth] pursues this aim. God speaks, says K. Barth: man listens and repeats what God has said. Unfortunately, as is inevitable from the moment that a man sets himself up as His interpreter: God speaks, the Barthian listens and repeats what Barth has said. ("Intelligence in the Service" 223)

An understanding of Bahá'í theology depends, as in all philosophical questions, on working definitions. The word *theology* is used basically in two ways: narrow and broad. With some limited restrictions, these usages are quite compatible with the Bahá'í Faith. On the one hand, the narrow use of the term denotes Christianity and applies to dogmatic theology, a corpus of theological writings that have been worked out historically in church council, often through acrimonious theological disputes. Proponent of "world theology" Wilfred Cantwell Smith rejects, however, the notion that theology is a specifically Christian term and ascribes a much larger meaning to the word.<sup>13</sup> It is, however, incorrect to characterize all Christian theology as "dogmatic," since that designation applies to only one branch of Christian theology, especially in the Church of Rome, a branch that concerns itself with orthodox pronouncements of doctrine.<sup>14</sup> With the exception of fundamentalism, most modern and postmodern<sup>15</sup> theologians write from nondogmatic perspectives. We are not currently living in the age of the great dogma, but rather, in a post-dogmatic age. Theology in the narrower sense is also written from a faith perspective, which accepts the authority of divine revelation—usually, but not necessarily, from a single source—that ordinarily views its own teachings as "normative," that is, determinative of the truths of other faiths. Here Bahá'í source theology stands as a close parallel with its traditional biblical or quranic counterparts: the norm by which other truths are distinguished.

The broad use of the word *theology*, on the other hand, refers to any religious consideration of God or the gods, humanity, the world, cosmology, salvation, eschatology, etc. Although one can even propose broader definitions of theology that exclude God or religion, such as nontheistic or so-called atheistic Buddhism<sup>16</sup> or Marxism,<sup>17</sup> for pragmatic purposes, theological questions usually deal with the dimension of transcendence. There is some scholarly support, however, for the position that the interpretation of atheism and nihilism in Buddhism was a "later aberration" of the philosophers and was not part of authentic and original Buddhism (Panikkar, *Silence* 9), a position that would be congenial to the Bahá'í interpretation of Buddhism.<sup>18</sup> Buddhists today would prefer "doctrine" to theology since they shy away from *theos*. Even doctrine would be too much for some in the face of the Buddha's silence. The broad use of theology, moreover, also extends the meaning of the word to religious experience generally, as perceived in the psychology of religion or mysticism, and includes the comparative study of religions.<sup>19</sup> It also places a premium on the perspective of religious pluralism and the historical study of religion.

It is worth noting in passing that while in North America (1912), 'Abdu'l-Bahá specifically endorsed the study of comparative religion as a means for combating prejudice and superstition and for fostering "fellowship" and "brotherhood," and recommended the investigation of an underlying religious unity as a means of abolishing prejudice.<sup>20</sup> The broad use of the word theology does not, however, recognize as normative any one religious tradition. Even though, from the time of F. Max Müller (1823–1900), one of "the founding fathers of comparative

religion” (Sharpe, *Comparative* 252), historians of religion or comparative religionists were careful at first to distinguish their work from theology, which was looked upon as being dogmatic, apologetic, and orthodox-exclusive, more recently they have reverted to using the word *theology*, albeit in a broader sense of simply speaking the truth about God. This newer understanding of theology has given rise to such phrases and new enterprises as comparative theology,<sup>21</sup> world theology,<sup>22</sup> and interreligious dialogue.

All theology, however, begins in some sense as a quest to understand God, or the gods, through a spiritual and rational interpretation of humanity and the universe. As such, theology is meant to assist in the discovery of the divine truths that have been deposited first in God’s written revelation and then in all of creation, the “two books” of which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks.<sup>23</sup> At the simplest and most nonthreatening level, theology can be looked upon simply as “God-talk,” an expression that is sometimes used instead of “theology.”<sup>24</sup>

Theology, either narrow or broad, requires conscious reflection or critical analysis of questions about God and religion. If theology were not critical reflection on the faith experience, it would remain undifferentiated from “blind faith” or religious practice, that is, an accepted and unquestioned belief system. As “the science that treats of the divine” (*The Penguin Dictionary of Religions* 328), theology is a systematic reflection upon certain key questions of the faith-state or the given belief system. G. F. van Ackeren’s cogent definition states that theology is: “The methodological elaboration of the truths of divine revelation by reason enlightened by faith” (“Theology”), a definition that follows St. Anselm of Canterbury’s (1033–1109) teaching of “faith seeking understanding—I believe, so that I may understand” (*fides quaerens intellectum—credo, ut intelligam*), a statement that is congenial to Bahá’í theology.

From both the broad and narrow uses of the word, we can conclude that the definition of theology would be compatible with the Bahá’í Faith, with two restrictions: First, the Bahá’í Faith eschews dogma. Second, while the Bahá’í Faith regards its teachings as normative, it does not view them as orthodox-exclusive.

Bahá’í theology cannot be dogmatic in the normal sense of the word, that is, a final and duly perceived infallible doctrine imposed upon the believers by the institutions of religion. However, the *function* of dogma, in contradistinction to dogma itself, is preserved in the Bahá’í notion of “authority,” that is, the *ipse dixit* teachings of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. These *ipse dixit* teachings are perceived objectively by the community of believers as being statements of truth, and as such carry binding authority, harking back to one of the original meanings of dogma, that is, a revealed doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Likewise the inspired interpretations of Shoghi Effendi or the enactments or pronouncements of the Universal House of Justice, while they do not have the status of prophetic divine revelation, carry divine authority that is binding upon believers. The church, however, claimed for its dogmas not only divine authority but the status of divine revelation itself, as Harnack’s statement (see n. 25) indicates. Commentary by scholars, moreover, regardless of their status in the Bahá’í Faith, remains nonauthoritative and nonbinding. Commentary has strictly a pedagogical function in the Bahá’í Faith. Dogma is, moreover, arbitrary by nature and eschews any connection with or appeal to philosophy, while Bahá’í theology is in large part philosophical theology, or “divine philosophy” in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s phrase, and in many cases is philosophy as revelation, since specific philosophical concepts and constructs are taught in Bahá’í sacred scripture. For example, a fundamental philosophic concept that has been incorporated into Bahá’í theology is the Platonic idea of the impossibility of knowing the essence of any thing in itself, Kant’s *Ding an sich*. The possibility of knowing its attributes, however, is affirmed (*Some Answered Questions* 220). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts, however, that the knowledge of God’s “true attributes” remains unknown. What we may suppose are God’s attributes are merely human projections that in no way resemble them. In his letter to Dr. Auguste Forel (*God and the Universe*) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “It is not meant, however, that that Universal Reality or the attributes thereof have been comprehended. Neither its Essence nor its true attributes hath any one comprehended” (*Bahá’í World Faith* 346).

Dogma, moreover, usually intends only one possible meaning to the teaching under discussion, whereas in Bahá’u’lláh’s hermeneutic, the divine word has multiple and hidden meanings.<sup>26</sup> Further, Bahá’í theology is not viewed by its proponents to be the exclusive truth. The truths of other divine revelations are specifically affirmed,<sup>27</sup> while the many doctrinal accretions in the world faiths have to be evaluated individually in the light of Bahá’u’lláh’s divinely revealed teachings.

Based on these considerations, one can offer two heuristic definitions of Bahá’í theology. The first points to revelation as the source of theology; the second points to theology as commentary on revelation. The narrow definition refers to the Bahá’í revelation itself, what I call here *source theology* or *revelation theology*, which is the substance of Bahá’í sacred scripture.<sup>28</sup> Bahá’í source theology refers to the authoritative, objective, and normative truths of the Bahá’í sacred writings or those elucidated by its duly appointed interpreters. Authoritative means that the teaching is binding on believers; objective means that the truths of source theology are commonly perceived and recognized as true by the community of believers; normative means that the teaching is recognized by believers as

the standard of truth. The broader definition refers to the commentary of scholars, called here derivative theology: Bahá'í derivative theology (commentary) is the subjective, relative, and nonbinding elucidation of Bahá'í teachings by competent scholars. Subjective here means that the commentary is particular to the viewpoint of the writer and becomes objective only where a common consensus exists as to its validity.

Further, to observe the distinctions in Bahá'u'lláh's writings made by Shoghi Effendi, we can say that all Bahá'í theology, whether source or derivative can be subdivided into three categories: the doctrinal, ethical, and mystical (*God Passes By* 140). The bulk of theological writing to date, however, falls almost entirely into the doctrinal category. Very little commentary exists on the ethical dimension (moral theology), which predominates, for example, in the religions of China and Japan, and particularly in Confucianism. Moreover, little has been written by Bahá'í scholars on mysticism.<sup>29</sup> Theology is also concerned with the processes of history and with God's revelation and final purpose (eschatology) within history.

### **The Relativity of Religious Truth: Relating to the Absolute<sup>30</sup>**

The notion of the relativity of religious truth is one of the fundamental questions in Bahá'í philosophical theology.<sup>31</sup> Shoghi Effendi names the teaching in conjunction with progressive revelation and describes it as “the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief . . .” (*The World Order* 115). The Bahá'í teaching on relativity dates back to the prophetic insights in the nineteenth century of the founders of the Bahá'í Faith. The teaching is thus grounded in revelation rather than speculation, giving it the authority of scripture and ensuring it a lasting place in Bahá'í theology.

Like any concept, relativity has its own history. In Western philosophy, relativity is usually traced to the first and most renowned humanistic Sophist, Protagoras (481–411 B.C.) with his well-known proposition, “Man is the measure of all things.”<sup>32</sup> Protagoras's view of relativity was based on his understanding of perception, which seemed to include both sense perception and opinion. In response to a critique by Plato, Protagoras cites the example of food that tastes bitter to the sick man but wholesome to the man who is well.<sup>33</sup> Protagoras extended this subjective perception to his theory of truth. All opinions are true, he argued, because they are true for the one perceiving them. They have no universal validity. This concept led to both a radical subjectivism in epistemology and an ethical relativism that was criticized by Plato in the *Theaetetus*.<sup>34</sup>

Although relativity is currently used as a tool to promote interfaith understanding by deabsolutizing the perception of one's own truth, it was first perceived as a threat to official doctrine by the Roman Catholic Church because it ascribed temporal conditions and subjective limitations to Catholic dogma, which was held to be immutable. Relativity was condemned by Pope Pius X in his encyclical *Lamentabili Sane* or *Lamentabili Sane Exitu* (Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists) (1907) with its list of sixty-five modern errors, a syllabus that was modelled upon Pope Pius IX's *Syllabus Errorum* (Syllabus of Errors) (1864).<sup>35</sup> The leader of Catholic modernism, Alfred Loisy (1857–1949), priest, noted bible scholar, and lecturer at the Institut Catholique in Paris, was excommunicated in 1908 in part for relativizing dogmatic theology. Loisy had declared in *L'Évangile et l'Église* that dogmatic definitions are always relative, variable, and conditioned by historical circumstances. Loisy, however, had also extended his concept of relativity to Jesus and declared Jesus to be limited and fallible in his judgments. Loisy also opposed traditional teaching on the inspiration of scripture (Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought* 280–83, 291, 452). The American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962) also treated relativity in *The Meaning of Revelation* (7–38), although he distinguished it from a radical subjectivism and skepticism.<sup>36</sup>

Although the concept of the relativity of religious truth is not new to the Bahá'í Faith, its use is somewhat novel. The context of Shoghi Effendi's statement correlates relativity with progressive revelation. Niebuhr and Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), Nobel laureate for peace (1930), comparative religionist and primate of the Church of Sweden, also had their own concepts of “progressive revelation” and “continued revelation” respectively.<sup>37</sup>

Shoghi Effendi's joining of the relativity of religious truth with progressive revelation yields, however, a first-level meaning of relativity. The Bahá'í view of dispensational progressive revelation is that religious truth is relative both to our point in historical evolution and to the state of our current understanding. According to this view, the Bahá'í Faith is not the final prophetic revelation. Revelation is unending, Bahá'í scripture affirms. There will, therefore, be other revelations. In that sense, the Bahá'í view of religious truth is not absolute, for truth unfolds progressively and will continue to do so “to the end that hath no end...” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 68).<sup>38</sup> This view can be contrasted with the more absolute and fundamentalist views of the finality of revelation in Christocentric Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.

There are, however, other implications for religious relativity. The current discussion among practitioners of interreligious dialogue and “world theology” favors a bias toward the relativity pole of the discussion, what

Langdon Gilkey has called “the flood of relativity” (“Plurality” 50). The polar opposite of relativity, the absolute, has largely been avoided because of its negative associations with dogmatism and orthodox exclusivism. One of the benefits of the relativity of religious truth is that it has allowed us to recognize revelation, truth, salvation, and grace in traditions other than our own. This has been just one inheritance from liberal Protestant theology, an inheritance that has emancipated Christian theology from doctrinal exclusivism and has driven Christian theologians and comparative religionists to lead the way in fostering interreligious dialogue and in making the first tentative theories in “world theology.”

However, certain cautions need to be cited in connection with relativity. David J. Krieger and Raimundo Panikkar, for example, warn against letting relativity slip into a radical relativism that rejects any criteria of truth as being universally valid to adjudicate among the various theological conceptual systems.<sup>39</sup> The teaching has therefore been rightly scrutinized lest it abolish the domain of the absolute, which has not only a long philosophical history but also definite implications for grounding one’s personal religious convictions and for the impact of such convictions on the dynamics of interreligious dialogue. Relativity has also led to an impasse surrounding the resolution of apparent doctrinal differences and contradictions. The theories of some perennial philosophy such as Huston Smith’s “primordial tradition,” or Frithjof Schuon’s “esoteric” mystical heart of all religions as distinguished from the “exoteric” accidentals seem to be the more promising proposals as a way out the dilemma.<sup>40</sup>

Relativity, moreover, should not fall into the trap of absolutizing relativity, which would be tantamount to an ironic defeat of its own purpose. Relativity itself is also relative and invites the imposition of some limits on the concept. To use a literally “down-to-earth” biological analogy, relativity and the absolute have to live in symbiosis, much like the algae and fungi in the lichen. As Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) pointed out in *First Principles*, one pole of the relativity-absolutism discussion can only be meaningful in the light of the other. If relativity is pursued exclusively, without defining its relation to the absolute, it takes on the function of an absolute itself and results in contradiction:

From the necessity of thinking in relation, it follows that the Relative is itself inconceivable, except as related to a real non-relative. Unless a real Non-relative or Absolute be postulated, the Relative itself becomes absolute, and so brings the argument to a contradiction. (Spencer, quoted in Reck, *Speculative Philosophy* 195)

Leonard Swidler, a Catholic ecumenical theologian, summarizes four cogent arguments for the relativity of religious truth, an approach he labels as “deabsolutizing truth.” Swidler discusses in turn: (1) *The historicization of truth*. Statements are products of their historical *Sitz im Leben* and can only be understood by examining the *Sitz*. Statement A will not have the same meaning in one historical context (*Sitz* 1) as it will in a later one (*Sitz* 2). It will require at least a qualifying or different statement (*Statement B*). (2) *The sociology of knowledge*. This refers to a sociological theory of knowledge. All statements are relative not only to a point in time but also to the standpoint of the speaker and are determined by that perspective whether cultural, social, religious, etc. The speaker’s worldview determines the truth of the statement. In Karl Mannheim’s phrase, it is *standortgebunden* (standpoint bound). (3) *The limits of language*. Following Wittgenstein, any statement is per force cast in the limited perspective of the speaker, whether categories, style, method, etc. (4) *Subjective hermeneutics*. Following Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, one cannot make claim to the “true” interpretation of a text since the subject is part of the object, the observer forms part of the observed. All views of truth deabsolutize truth for they are interpretive and relational (Swidler, “Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue,” esp. 7–13). We could reduce these statements to a simpler one: Statements of truth are relative to our ability to understand and express them, relative to the age in which they appear, and relative to the speaker’s viewpoint.

Religious relativity acts then as a bulwark against the one-way interpretation of dogmatism; implies that religious truth although fundamentally one, is progressive, dynamic, infinite, and ever-changing; and allows us to accept various interpretations of metaphysical and theological questions, which would on the surface appear to be incompatible. It is thus an ally of a more inclusive view of reality, one that allows for a diversity of approaches. The relativity of religious truth also has strong implications for reestablishing some measure of unity between science and religion or philosophy—one of the most meaningful and potentially fruitful questions in our time.

### **The Function of the Absolute**

The domain of the relative invokes that of the absolute. Like so many other bipolar issues, such as the universal and the particular, fact and value, spirit and matter, logic and intuition, revelation and reason, the domains of the relative and the absolute engage us in a dialectic that invites consideration of both poles of the discussion.

At the outset, there is something chilling in the notion of the Absolute. As a philosophical concept of God, it would appear not to coexist well with the view of God as a Being who enters into a personal spiritual relationship with the believer, although serious attempts have been made to combine belief in a personal God with the Absolute.<sup>41</sup> The Absolute also has connotations of an arbitrariness of will, of unlimited self-determination and power. According to Karl Popper, the Absolute was applied in Hegel's political theory to justify absolute power in the rising German nation through a philosophy of State that led to the devastating effects of nationalism and totalitarianism.<sup>42</sup> In religious praxis, absolutism has led to narrow dogmatism and orthodox exclusivism, which, in the sacred academy at least, have gradually given way in the post-World War II years to a growing relativism that recognizes the validity of the convictions of the faith of others.

There are, however, aspects to the notion of the absolute that make it essential to the functioning of our religious beliefs and, when balanced with an appreciation of the deabsolutizing and limiting aspects of relativity, make it a congenial ally for both the praxis of interreligious dialogue and the self-recognition of the limited but ever-expanding nature of our cognitive beliefs.

The absolute functions as an existential center for our religious convictions. It is in this center or on this ground that we stand when we interpret the world in spiritual terms. If we did not stand on the hard ground of some central beliefs, we should be subject to the drifts of shifting sands created by the passing of every wind. Gilkey makes the point that our worldview and religious convictions function as absolutes, as "some fixed or absolute center" in our interpretation of reality:

We need a ground for the apprehension and understanding of reality—a ground that undergirds our choices, our critiques of the status quo, our policies. We need a ground for the values and eros that fuel and drive toward justice, and for the confidence and hope necessary for consistent action. We need criteria for the judgments essential both for reflective construction and for liberative doing; and we need priorities in value if we would creatively and actively move into the future. ("Plurality" 46)

While Gilkey's statement does not constitute an attempt at a philosophical reconciliation of the absolute and the relative, it nonetheless provides a strong dose of realism as to the actual functioning of the absolute nature of our spiritual values in the perspective of faith in action or praxis.

Speaking as a Christian engaged in interreligious dialogue, Gilkey states that he has chosen to remain within the Christian tradition, since one "cannot escape all particularity" ("Plurality" 49). For the Bahá'í, and indeed for the member of any faith, Gilkey's words ring true, for they alert us to the existential center, to the point of departure. By opting for a spiritual center, we avoid the "slippery slope" of so-called value neutrality, of being nowhere by standing everywhere. Interreligious dialogue begins, then, from the center of our particular faith and sets out in an adventure to discover new and creative understandings of our own and the other's particular spiritual truth, in the hope of creating new universals, in Plato's sense of discovering some fundamental essence to all of the particulars. Our religious convictions are, then, functional absolutes. They orient us in life, without imposing a claim to immutability or finality in terms of our understanding of them. Without these functional absolutes, moreover, we would lack a sense of commitment so necessary for moving the study of religion out of the purely speculative, academic, and theoretical realms and putting it more firmly into the camp of praxis, dialogue, and social action.

It would be too hasty to conclude, therefore, that religious relativity has done away with the Absolute (absolute), either in its concept of God, or in the perception of "normative" or irreducible truths in Bahá'í scripture, or in the absolute nature of the claim to observe ethical conduct. Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the prophetic figure for the present age carries with it an extraordinary apocalyptic certitude, and while affirming a fundamental oneness in the revealed religions and recognizing the colossal achievements of these religious systems, Bahá'u'lláh also maintains that the Bahá'í Revelation is in our age the standard for determining other truths.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, Bahá'ís view Bahá'u'lláh's teachings as the ultimate standard for truth in our dispensation, the metaphysical point beyond which we cannot currently advance, a kind of speed of light or point of "absolute zero" of spiritual truth. The Bahá'í belief in Bahá'u'lláh as the ultimate standard of truth does not betray, however, any narrow dogmatism or fundamentalism. Arnold Toynbee, just one of several to make a similar observation, perceived an exemplary spirit of tolerance in the Bahá'í Faith: "Of all the Judaic religions, Bahaism is the most tolerant. In its catholicity, it comes near to Mahayanian Buddhism or to Hinduism" (*Christianity among the Religions* 104).

### **Interreligious Dialogue: A Means of Resolving the Tension between the Relative and the Absolute**

If practitioners of world theology and interreligious dialogue have concentrated on the relativity side of the relativity–absolutism equation, it is not merely for reasons of deabsolutizing dogma. Andrew J. Reck asserts that “few categories in the history of philosophy have been intractable to conceptual specification as the category of the Absolute” (*Speculative* 167). Reconciling relativity to the absolute remains a challenging *problématique*, or so it would seem. Ernst Grunwald rejected Karl Mannheim’s notion of “relationism” in the sociology of knowledge (*Wissenssoziologie*) as a proposed middle ground between relativism and the absolute, by stating flatly: “Relativism and absolutism are contradictory opposites with no more ‘middle ground’ between them than exists between true and false, yes and no” (“Sociology of Knowledge” 240). Further, if God, as in Hegelian philosophy, is merely the Absolute or the Absolute Idea, the perfect resolution of all the contradictions of dialectic in some higher Metaidea, what remains of the personal God? If God is merely an Idea, albeit the perfect idea, God remains primarily an object of pure thought alone and is reduced to philosophical abstraction.<sup>44</sup> How can this Absolute Idea be reconciled to the concept of God as a Self, who is perceived as a Person and who relates to other persons or selves in an intimate spiritual relationship of love? An attempt to reconcile these concepts has been made by the American idealist philosopher Josiah Royce (1855–1916) who maintained a belief in a personal God while postulating God as the Absolute, the Universal of universals, an attempt that historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston regards as only partially successful.<sup>45</sup>

Langdon Gilkey sees in the relative-absolute equation a frustrating paradox that is difficult to resolve, at least theoretically: “The interplay of absolute and relative of being a Christian, Jew, or Buddhist, and affirming that stance, and yet at the same time relativizing this mode of existence—both stuns and silences the mind, at least mine” (“Plurality” 47). Although the relativity–absolute paradox appears to be obdurate, Gilkey goes on to propose a resolution of it, but not one that lies in the realm of speculation. Rather, this resolution lies in the realm of religious experience and action, that of religious dialogue.

Following the pragmatics of John Dewey that what may seem to ratiocination [the process of reason] a “hopeless contradiction” may become “successfully resolved” through “intelligent practice” (“Plurality” 46), Gilkey views dialogue as the framework for relativity as a *de facto* imperative, while the participants remain nonetheless in the domain of the absolute. On the psychological level, our religious convictions function as absolutes; otherwise we would not be Christian, Bahá’í, Buddhist, or some other. We would *be* that other. Once we enter into dialogue, however, we must abandon our absolutes; otherwise, there would be no dialogue, only a monologue whose covert agenda would be conversion. Praxis requires, therefore, that we relativize our absolute convictions. In interreligious dialogue, we become only one faith among others, as we stand face to face with the other(s). As we interact in dialogue, we feel limited. Our absolute convictions (e.g., Bahá’u’lláh is the promised Manifestation of God) become relativized by the presence of the other(s), with their equally weighty claims on truth. In dialogue, Gilkey sees an on-going dynamic tension between the relative and the absolute, “a dialectic or paradox combining and interweaving ...a relative absoluteness” (“Plurality” 47):

What to reflection is a contradiction, to praxis is a workable dialectic, a momentary but creative paradox. Absolute and relative, unified vision and plurality, a centered principle of interpretation and mere difference, represent polarities apparently embodyable in crucial practice despite the fact that they seem numbing in reflective theory. (“Plurality” 47)

Gilkey is calling for a new type of experimental scholarship, one that would take the scholar out of the refuge of his study into a praxis of colloquia with other scholars. Following this approach, the solitary individual must engage in a kind of cooperative learning, a creative participatory approach that bases its method in dialogue: “Thus reflection must not, because it cannot, precede praxis; on the contrary, it must be begun on the basis of praxis” (“Plurality” 47). By pursuing such a method, we discover that the One is revealed in the many, the Absolute appears within the relative, new and creative understandings of the oneness of spiritual truth are discovered. Gilkey’s pragmatic approach does not preclude, however, a successful theoretical resolution of the relative and the absolute.

### **In Search of a Common Terminology: Science of Divinity, Divine Philosophy, and Bahá’í Theology**

While Bahá’ís refer to their sacred scriptures as the Bahá’í Revelation or the Bahá’í Writings, there is no common terminology to describe *derivative theology*. It would seem appropriate for Bahá’í scholars to share a common terminology when referring to commentary. The search for correct terminology in the Bahá’í Faith is analogous to the search by scholars in the history of religions to find the correct terminology to describe their discipline:



*Religionswissenschaft* [science of religion], history of religions, comparative religion, religiology, and the science of religion have all been proposed, with “history of religions” and “*Religionswissenschaft*” dominating the field.<sup>46</sup> Comparative religion is, strictly speaking, one of the subdisciplines of the history of religions on which it is based, although comparative religion is commonly used in Anglo-Saxon countries to refer to the study of the world’s religions.

It is worth having a clearer understanding of the usage of the following terms, not only for examining their usage in the Bahá’í Faith but more especially to anticipate how these terms would be understood in interfaith dialogue in which Bahá’í scholars would, one hopes, participate. A summary treatment is given below.

### **The Science of Divinity (Divinity)**

Both “the science of divinity” and “divine philosophy” have close associations with revelation. “Science of divinity” is a term taken directly from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Promulgation* 326). Although the phrase is associated with both Shiite gnosis and Christian theology, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá associates divinity with divine philosophy: “... it [divinity] essentially means the wisdom and knowledge of God, the effulgence of the Sun of Truth, the revelation of reality and divine philosophy” (*Promulgation* 326). Defining it in the negative, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá dissociates divinity from its meaning in Christian dogmatic theology, thus giving the old word a new meaning:

Divinity is not what is set forth in dogmas and sermons of the church. Ordinarily when the word Divinity is mentioned, it is associated in the minds of the hearers with certain formulas and doctrines.... (*Promulgation* 326)

He explains that

Divinity is the effulgence of the Sun of Reality, the manifestation of spiritual virtues and ideal powers. The intellectual proofs of Divinity are based upon observation and evidence which constitute decisive argument, logically proving the reality of Divinity, the effulgence of mercy, the certainty of inspiration and immortality of the spirit. This is, in reality, the science of Divinity. (*Promulgation* 326)

This passage establishes a rationalist basis for the science of divinity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of “intellectual proofs,” “observation and evidence,” and “decisive argument.” These are all phrases that derive from dialectics. The passage mentions proofs for the existence of God, as well as the immortality of the soul and divine inspiration, subjects treated in medieval scholastic theology, which was also essentialist and rationalist in orientation.

### **Divine Philosophy**

Another of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s expressions is “divine philosophy,” which might be taken to mean divinely revealed philosophy or revelation. He states, for example, “According to divine philosophy, there are two important and universal conditions in the world of material phenomena; one which concerns life, the other concerning death...” (*Reality of Man* 28).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s divine philosophy is used in contradistinction to natural philosophy and is reminiscent of the ancient Aristotelian distinction between “physics” (natural philosophy/science) and “metaphysics,” or the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century distinction between “natural philosophy” (today biology and physics) and “moral philosophy,” a distinction that arose because of the growing prestige of the conclusions of Galileo and the emergence of Newtonian physics:

Philosophy is of two kinds: natural and divine. Natural philosophy seeks knowledge of physical verities and explains material phenomena, whereas divine philosophy deals with ideal verities and phenomena of the spirit. (*Promulgation* 326)

Although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s philosophy takes Muslim Neoplatonism as its starting point, his mention of “ideal verities” and “phenomena of spirit” is strongly suggestive of the Western philosophy of idealist metaphysics, a philosophy that also traces its origins to Plato and which endured in various forms until the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> Idealism may have some relevance in the establishment of some philosophical unity between religion and science.<sup>48</sup>

## **Bahá'í Theology**

Although the phrase “Bahá'í theology” is not used in Bahá'í sacred scripture, the term remains nonetheless valid. In a communication to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Germany, the Universal House of Justice endorsed a qualified use of the term “Bahá'í theology” when they state:

If one understands “theology” to mean “the study of religion” or “the study of the nature of God,” one can certainly use the term “Bahá'í theology.” In the context in which...uses it in the passage you quote, the House of Justice presumes that he means that the Bahá'í teachings about the nature of God and His relationship to His creation are related to those of Islam, which is correct. (February 8, 1981)<sup>49</sup>

The House of Justice, however, in another communication has left the term's usage a matter for Bahá'í scholars:

The House of Justice feels that the question of whether or not to use the term “Bahá'í Theology” is best left to the discretion of yourself and other Bahá'í scholars, who would make such a decision in the light of their understanding of the meaning of this term and the connotations of such usage. (Letter to an individual, 28 May 1991)

The House of Justice also adds the proviso that no controversy should arise about the matter and foresees the possibility of a variety of views on the subject:

It trusts that this matter will not become a source of contention between Bahá'í scholars and within the Bahá'í community, and sees no difficulties with Bahá'í scholars coming to different conclusions about the appropriateness of this usage provided they do not attempt to compel others to accept their views. (Letter to an individual, 28 May 1991)

The guidelines on the usage of the term “Bahá'í theology” by the Universal House of Justice could well serve as a keynote of Bahá'í scholarship, theological or otherwise: Scholarship should be noncontentious and diverse.

The adjectival form of the word, *theological*, occurs in various English-language renderings of Bahá'í scripture or its authoritative interpretation. Shoghi Effendi, for example, uses the term in his interpretive English translation of Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. Reference is made to Muslim divines who “are still doubtful of, and dispute about, *the theological obscurities* of their faith, yet claim to be the exponents of the subtleties of the law of God...” (83, emphasis added).<sup>50</sup> In a talk on reincarnation, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of the station of humanity as being at the end of the “arc of descent” (materiality) and at the beginning of the “arc of ascent” (spirituality) as “an established and deep theological proposition” (*musallam-i-mudaqqiqín-i-masá'il-i-iláhí*) (*Questions* 285–86). Shoghi Effendi uses the word theological in connection with the importance of the study of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*: “The *Íqán* deepens the knowledge of the reader by acquainting him with some of the theological problems of the Faith” (letter to an individual, 10/1/33, Bahá'í International Archives).<sup>51</sup>

The term “Bahá'í theology,” once viewed with great hesitation, has become increasingly common with Bahá'í scholars, particularly with those writing on specifically religious questions. Udo Schaefer referred to *Theologie* in the Bahá'í Faith in his 1957 doctoral dissertation (Heidelberg) *Die Grundlagen der Verwaltungsordnung der Bahá'í* (The Legal Basis of the Bahá'í Administrative Order).<sup>52</sup> Schaefer's recent book *Heilsgeschichte und Paradigmenwechsel: Zwei Beiträge zur Bahá'í Theologie* (Salvation History and Paradigm Shift: Two Contributions to Bahá'í Theology, not yet published in English), deals specifically with Bahá'í theology, as the title suggests.<sup>53</sup> Claudia Gollmer's master's thesis is entitled *Die metaphysischen und theologischen Grundlagen der Erziehungslehre der Bahá'í-Religion* (The Metaphysical and Theological Foundations of Education in the Bahá'í Religion). Juan R. I. Cole, likewise, made use of the term “Bahá'u'lláh's theology” in “The Christian–Muslim Encounter and the Bahá'í Faith.” His later “The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings” uses “Bahá'í theology” and “Bahá'u'lláh's theology” (3, 23). Cole's use of the term “Bahá'í theology” points to the narrow use of the word, that is, to source theology (revelation). Cole uses the phrase in his discussion of the relationship between the divine essence and its attributes, citing Bahá'u'lláh's “Tablet of the City of Divine Unity” (*Lawh-i-Madínati't-Tawhíd*) in which, Cole states: “One must understand the nature of these attributes in Bahá'í theology in order to grasp the concept of the manifestation of God. Bahá'u'lláh affirms that God's essential attributes are simply different names for his essence” (“The concept of Manifestation” 3). In other words, God is one in essence and attributes. Cole also speaks of the cosmological infusion of spiritual energies released with the martyrdom of a prophet as one aspect of “Bahá'u'lláh's theology” (“The Christian–Muslim Encounter” 22). Cole's usage of the term, at least on the basis of these few examples, applies to the writings of Bahá'u'lláh rather than

commentary. Moojan Momen also recognizes that “there are ample passages in the Bahá’í scriptures that could serve as the basis of theology and metaphysics” (“Relativism” 185). Michael Sours deals directly with a theological issue in “Seeing with the Eye of God.” Likewise, social scientist Will. C. van den Hoonaard speaks of “Bahá’í theologians and historians” (“Dilemmas and Prospects” 24). Nader Saiedi also speaks of “Bahá’í theology” in “A Dialogue with Marxism.” These examples are not exhaustive.

A reluctance to use the word *theology* is not new to the Bahá’í Faith. Surprisingly, the word was at first avoided in Christianity, the faith that is most closely associated with it. Within Christianity, the term theology was used very infrequently in the beginning and even avoided for several centuries because of the connotations of the word in Greek philosophy. *Theologia* for Plato and Aristotle was used polemically against the poets and their mythologies and theogonies. Plato and Aristotle contrasted these with philosophy, which sought explanations of things in themselves (Congar, “Christian Theology” 455). Plato was, moreover, a monotheist, and the poets were polytheists. The poets were seen as rivals to the philosophers, since it was widely held that Homer and the tragedians were the masters of technical knowledge as well as being sound guides of the moral and religious life (*Republic* 322, editor’s note). Plato, however, denied the poet’s ability to lead to the knowledge of the essence of things and viewed dramatic art as a bane to human psychology, and poetry far removed from true knowledge (*Republic* 328–40). He, therefore, excluded the poets from *The Republic*.

The great Origen (d. 254) was the first to use “*theologia*” to apply to the knowledge of the God in whom Christians believed, since the word *gnosis* (Gk. knowledge) had acquired heretical connotations (s.v., “theology,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*). Peter Abelard (d. 1142) used the word *theologia* as the title of one of his works, and by the time of St. Thomas Aquinas, the angelic doctor (A.D. 1225–1274) the word began to gain acceptance, although Aquinas himself preferred the term *sacra doctrina* (Congar, “Christian Theology” 456). Likewise, the phrase “Bahá’í theology” has been avoided within the Bahá’í community because of its negative associations of intellectual elitism, religious warfare, and *odium theologicum*, the antipathy caused by theological quarrelling.

There are at least three reasons, however, for looking at the phrase “Bahá’í theology” favorably: (1) It is the correct term to describe the nature of the thing itself, since Bahá’í teaching begins from a faith perspective and has a strong rational, metaphysical, and theological bias. (2) It is the correct term to use when the Bahá’í teachings are being cited as normative and authoritative, or not; that is, it may be used by either Bahá’ís or non-Bahá’ís for questions relating to the doctrines of the Bahá’í Faith. Catholic scholar Christian Cannuyer, for example, refers to the “Bahá’í theology” (*théologie bahá’ie*) of Shoghi Effendi in his favorable review of Peter Smith’s groundbreaking historical-sociological study *The Bábí and Bahá’í Religions: From Messianic Shi’ism to a World Religion*. (3) It is the term that would be most easily understood by non-Bahá’í scholars either in a discussion of Bahá’í teachings or in interfaith dialogue, where such terms as “world theology” and “pluralistic theology” have become part of the current language.

As systematic theologies of the Bahá’í Faith begin to be written or as Bahá’í theologies of the world religions are developed, phrases like “divine philosophy” or “science of divinity,” while perfectly congenial and appropriate for intracommunity dialogue and usage, might seem odd to scholars in religious studies in other traditions, since “science of divinity” might suggest an exclusively Christian focus and “divine philosophy”—a very lofty term—might also be taken to mean a philosophy of God exclusively. Whereas, Bahá’í theology is a more inclusive term, one that includes concepts that have an impact not just on sacred concerns but on secular ones as well, in such areas as education and moral development, ecological concerns, economics, women’s issues, the treatment of minorities, Third World development, and international law. Philosophy is also usually understood to be a secular term and to take reason as its ground rather than God and revelation. It would seem better, therefore, in the interests of both logic and accepted usage, to use the phrase “Bahá’í theology,” since it is closer to current terminology, rather than to have to use a new terminology that is out of synchronization with the current one. This has become all the more true now that comparative religionists are returning to the word *theology* to describe their own discipline.

### **The Hidden and Revealed God: Negative<sup>54</sup> and Manifestation Theology**

In making affirmations about God, Bahá’í theology employs a manifestation theology, that is, a theology of the metaphysical reality of the prophet or divine manifestation and his teachings rather than a theology of God. Bahá’u’lláh, however, makes some abstruse but explicit references to God in the occult or unmanifest state; to that silence which precedes God’s Word, to that divine darkness from which the holy light radiates forth. In the mystical, partially cosmological tablet, *Lawh-i-kullu’t-ta’ám* (The Tablet of All Food),<sup>55</sup> which delineates the metaphysical realms of paradise, Bahá’u’lláh points to the unmanifest God as God-*Háhút*, the One who dwells alone in the realm of “HE.” Of this realm of the paradise of the divine oneness, Bahá’u’lláh says: “None is capable

of expounding even a letter of that verse in that Paradise” (Lambden, “A Tablet” 31). We do not, and are asked not to, speculate on the nature of this God, for all efforts must end in futility. “The way is barred and to seek it is impiety...” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys* 23).

Bahá’u’lláh’s negative theology of *Háhút* is very much in the apophatic tradition. Apophasis (var. apophaticism) maintains the strictest silence about making any statements concerning the essence of divinity, which it views as being completely unknowable, and confines itself to defining God in the negative: whatever is affirmed of God, whether goodness, love, mercy, justice, perfection, etc., in no way describes God. By using such designations, it is simply affirmed that God is not lacking these qualities (negative theology/*via negativa*): “We affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 148). In affirming this negative theology, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is following a long well-established theological tradition.<sup>56</sup> In Buddhism, we find the extreme limit of apophasis would be the Buddha’s silence about God, which several scholars have interpreted as agnosticism or atheism but which comparative religionist Raimundo Panikkar takes as a sublime sign of the Buddha’s reverence for the mysterious and the ineffable.<sup>57</sup> Apophasis rejoins the Mahayana philosophic epithet *Neti, Neti* (Sk.=not this, not this) that indicates both a failure to conceptualize and a profound reverence for the Absolute. Apophasis can therefore take the belief in the divine unity to limits that would appear to approach agnosticism since apophasis does not affirm anything about God. About this hidden God, we can say ultimately nothing at all, the Bahá’í writings affirm.

By contrast, Christian and Vaishnavite incarnation theology, although not alike in all respects, define God’s essence on the presumption that the divine essence incarnates itself within the limited human form in an absolute way. Bahá’í theology, however, eschews such attempts and views them as being mistaken. Negative theology really begins in Stage One (see Fig. 1),<sup>58</sup> in the state of the God without attributes,<sup>59</sup> the God who is indescribable, the God about whom even the divine Manifestations have no knowledge. We begin there, with the dark spot of the hidden God, with God-*Háhút*, the realm of “HE.” Although clearly teaching that God does have attributes, Bahá’u’lláh is also quite emphatic that God “hath through all eternity been free of the attributes of human creatures, and ever will remain so” (*Seven Valleys* 23).

There is a certain parallel between the unmanifest God-*Háhút* and the teachings of Hinduism’s mystic philosopher Śankaracharya or Śankarā (c. 788–820), the Advaita (monistic) vedantist.<sup>60</sup> A well-known definition of Śankarā points to *Nirguna Brahman*, God without attributes, which he views to be a higher order of being, in contrast to *Saguna Brahman*, God with attributes. Śankarā teaches that for the *Jivanmukta* or liberated soul, the concept of a personal Lord (*Ishavara*) belongs to *Saguna Brahman*, the lower order of being, God with attributes. At a higher level, *Saguna Brahman* is absorbed by *Nirguna Brahman*.<sup>61</sup> God without attributes is the object of knowledge; God with attributes the object of love and worship (Deussen, *System of the Vedānta* 102). God without attributes is explained analogically as the stillness of the ocean, while God with attributes is compared to the ocean stirred up with waves (Smith, *Religions* 73). The Upanishads also refer to *Nirguna Brahman* as the “Unmanifest” (Katha 6:7,8), which is precisely the state of God-*Háhút*. Śankarā maintains that *Nirguna Brahman* is changeless and without form (*Vedānta* 207), and one can also postulate that such a description would apply to Bahá’u’lláh’s unmanifest God-*Háhút*.

In an analogy based on the writer, his pen and ink, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá likens this unmanifest, unknown, and unknowable *deus absconditus* (hidden God) to a black spot of ink—the divine darkness—on a piece of paper that potentially contains all letters and words, in short, all possible meanings of the universe within it (Momen, “Relativism” 190). This “God above God,”<sup>62</sup> in Tillich’s phrase, is the darkest and most impenetrable of mysteries, the Mystery of Mysteries. There are certain Judaic roots in the concept of the hidden God, for we read in Isaiah 45:15, “Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.”

Bahá’í theology does not have, therefore, as its point of departure, a theology of God such as Kant’s *Ding an sich*, but a theology about God, a theology of the Word (logos theology), which, like the divine names, is a common element in the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bábí–Bahá’í traditions.<sup>63</sup> This manifestation theology, which has been dubbed *theophanology* by Cole (“Concept of Manifestation” 2), is a gloss<sup>64</sup> on Shoghi Effendi’s description of the “rise” and “march” of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh as a “supreme Theophany”<sup>65</sup> (*The World Order* 97), a phrase that also has its roots in the Judeo–Christian tradition.<sup>66</sup> One could also refer to manifestation theology as the less euphonic *epiphanology*. Manifestation theology, however, is cataphatic; that is, it does make use of human analogies to describe God. Cataphatic affirmations about God are calculated upon analogies of human experience, qualities that are, in a sense, projected onto God. Cataphasis is sensitive to the fact that God transcends any qualities that we apply to God.

In Bahá'í theology, all statements about God apply to the Manifestation of God (*Mazhar-i-Iláhí* or prophet, *nabí, rasúl*), both terms being used in the Bahá'í Faith,<sup>67</sup>

Consequently, with reference to this plane of existence [God], every statement and elucidation is defective, all praise and all description are unworthy, every conception is vain, and every meditation is futile. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 147)

Theological statements apply only to the person of the divine manifestation:

Therefore, all that the human reality knows, discovers and understands of the names, the attributes and the perfections of God refer to these Holy Manifestations. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions* 148)

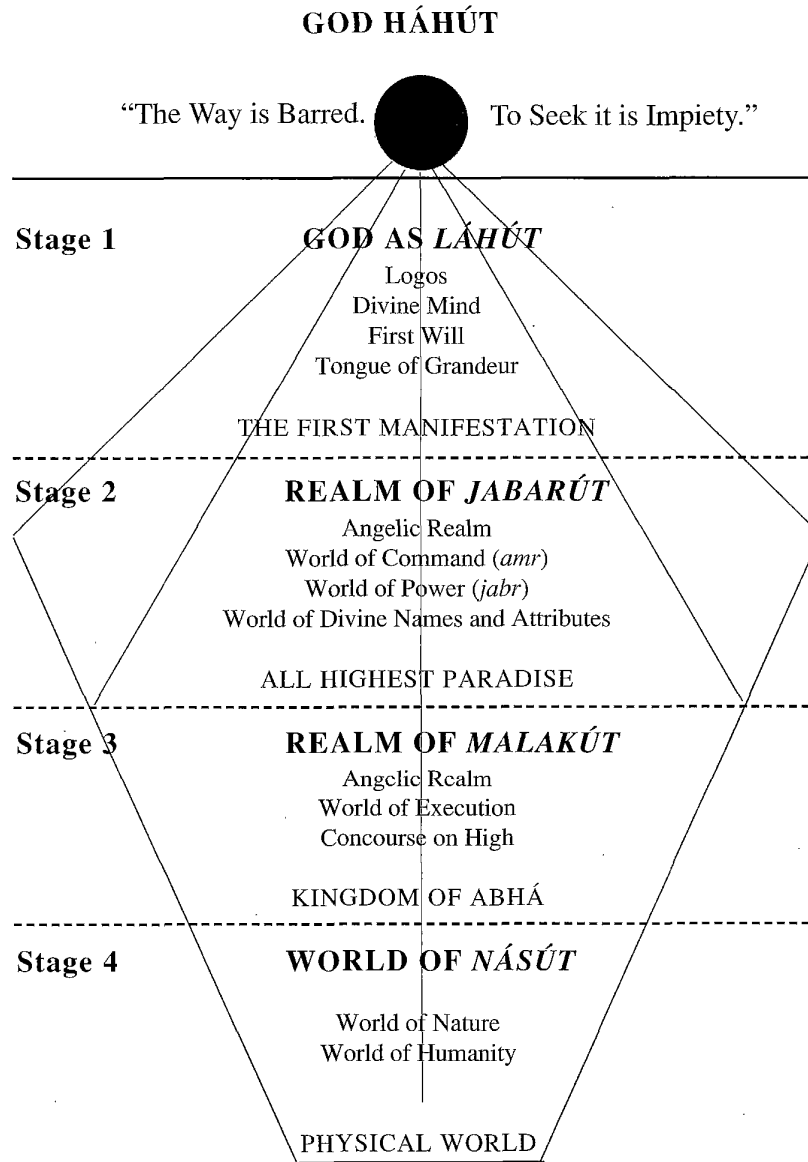


Figure 1. *The Realms of Being*

Note: Bahá'u'lláh's use of the names of the realms of being is identical to the terminology of the Sufi Path. See J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* 160–61.

Manifestation theology really begins in Stage Two, as God-*Láhu't*, God Manifest, here called simply the first Manifestation of God. The divine Manifestation is called variously the Primal Will, Logos, the divine Word, the divine nous (mind), etc. God Manifest is also expressed more poetically as “the Tongue of Grandeur” and “the Most Exalted Pen.” Here the divine Word takes on the character of the paradox, for it stands revealed within the Godhead as the sum of all the divine names but is not yet revealed to humanity and thus remains occulted within the Godhead. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also affirms that the “First Will” (*Questions* 203) or “Primal Will”<sup>68</sup> is the agent of creation. The same is also affirmed of the Manifestation or Word of God (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 140). It would appear, therefore, that the Primal Will originates with or is present in the Manifestation of God, and in this sense they are identical. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defines the stations of existence as three only: God, Kingdom (Manifestation/Word), Creation (*Questions* 295). This definition would appear to identify the Primal Will with the Kingdom, which is in turn synonymous with the divine Manifestations. The Primal Will, therefore, should not be seen above or existing independently of the Manifestation of God. The two appear to be synonymous.

Further, manifestation theology is essentialist. Its starting point is the definition of God as an “unknowable essence” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 167). The philosophy of essence as the source of all contingent beings has a long history stretching back to the Presocratics,<sup>69</sup> Plato, and Aristotle, through to Aquinas and the *‘Ilm-al-Kalám* school of Islam. Essentialism is a realist philosophy and a unified system of theology and philosophy since it is at the same time a theology, a cosmology, an epistemology, and an ontology. It deals with the most basic of questions—the nature of God, the nature of Reality (Being), God’s revelation, the origin of both Spirit and matter,<sup>70</sup> and what constitutes true knowledge. In Bahá’í perspective, the philosophy of essence includes the perception that the Manifestation of God and God’s divine names are at the origin of all other things in the universe, realities that are absolute and immutable, that is, persist unchanged through time. In this view, it is only these divine names and attributes that are worthy of our attention as objects of true knowledge.

The doctrine of the divine names or attributes, however, is not only a major question in Islamic theology and in the Bahá’í Faith. It is also treated by Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed*; by Dionysius, the Christian Neoplatonist, in his “Divine Names”; by Aquinas as the “divine names” or “transcendentals” (“Divinis Nominibus” [On the Divine Names], Question XIII, *Summa Theologica*); and by Spinoza in classical philosophy in the *Ethics*. It also has other implications for Western philosophy with strong resemblances to Plato’s doctrine of forms. To what extent Plato’s Form of the Good can be identified with the Manifestation remains as yet unexamined. Consequently, the divine names and attributes are one of those major questions that link at the same time the Semitic faiths and certain schools of Western philosophy.

Stages Three and Four of manifestation theology are those of the realms of *Jabarút* and *Malakút*, respectively; that is, the angelic realms of the divine names and attributes, the realms of power (*jabr*), command (*amr*), and execution. Islamic and Bahá’í beliefs in angels are based on the preceding Jewish and Christian traditions. Even though the Archangel Gabriel is depicted as commanding Bahá’u’lláh to speak (*Gleanings* 103), archangels do not rank above the Manifestation of God, for Bahá’u’lláh states that the Seraph of the Day of Judgment has been ordained by the word of Muhammad (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 116). In Old Testament theology there is a tradition that the prophet is an angel (Heb. *Mal’akh*=messenger) since the high prophets never mention the angels and since the prophet Haggai (1:13) is called “the angel of the Lord” (Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* 77). The Báb’s forerunner Siyyid Kázim Rashedí (d. 1843) would appear to have adopted the more ancient Hebrew tradition of angelology, since in his *Sermon of the Gulf* he referred to Imam Ja’far-i-Sádiq’s tradition of a proto-*Shí’ih* Cherub as being identical to the “Self” (*an-nafs*) of the prophet (Lambden, “Sinaitic Mysteries” 91–92).

Whether there is a rank ordering of the angelic beings of the realm of *Malakút* and the higher *Jabarút* is a matter of speculation. The realm of *Malakút* is referred to as the “Abhá kingdom” (heaven), while the realm of *Jabarút* suggests the higher state, “the all-highest paradise.” Further, in *Jabarút*, God’s decree or command (*amr*) is proclaimed. We might identify the realms of *Jabarút* and *Malakút* with the angelic realms of the seraphim and the cherubim respectively in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, for the seraphim and cherubim are “continually in the immediate presence of God, nearer than all others to Him, reflecting, without intervention of any other created being, the direct effulgence of his glory” (“Angels and Archangels” 86). In Dionysius’ “Celestial Hierarchy,” reputed to have been based on apostolic tradition, there are three orders of angels, each having a triple gradation making nine orders or choirs. Of the first order are the “thrones,” which are likewise identified with the seraphim and cherubim (“Angels and Archangels” 86). In Judaism, God directs Moses to place two gold cherubim facing one another on the “mercy seat,” also of pure gold, which covered the ark (Exod. 25:17–21). One of the seraphim commissions the Prophet Isaiah by touching his lips with a burning coal (Isa. 6:2). In Hebrew scripture, there would appear to be a ranking of the seraphim (angels of love) above the cherubim (angels of knowledge), if we are justified in inferring that the number of wings and the veiling of the face are symbols of power. The

seraphim have six wings, and their faces are veiled by two of them, and attend the divine throne from above (Isa. 6:2); whereas, the cherubim have four wings and stand under the throne (Ezek. 10:1). It is not clear in Bahá'í theology whether or not there is a ranking of the seraphim and cherubim.

The vision of Ezekiel's wheel accompanied by the angels cherubim would appear to be a vision of the divine unity, which Bahá'ís would perceive esoterically as a prefigurement of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, since Ezekiel's vision is attended by a manifestation of the glory of God (Ezek. 10:8), the name of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh likewise speaks of the cherubim and the seraphim, and has the cherubim standing "behind the throne" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 79), while the seraph (Pers. *Isráfíl*) Bahá'u'lláh depicts as the angel of the Judgment Day: "Hath not the Seraph himself, the angel of the Judgment Day, and his like been ordained by Muhammad's own utterance?" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 116). Muhammad adopted the Jewish and Christian traditions of angels in which Gabriel and Michael figured prominently as angels of revelation, protection, and mercy. According to the traditions, Isráfíl, the angel of the Judgment Day, whose name can probably be traced to the Hebrew *seráfím* (s.v. "Isráfíl," *Encyclopedia of Islam* 4:211) also commissioned the first revelations at Mecca but disappears after the *fitra*, the three years of silence observed by Muhammad, after which Gabriel assumes the on-going and predominant role (Gaufrey-Demombynes, *Mahomet* 75).

Finally God's names and attributes are manifest as *Násút*, his manifestation in the physical world. All kingdoms in the physical world are expressions of the Manifestation of God as the divine names. The believer whose life expresses fully the divine names lives in both the realms of *Násút* and *Malakút*, not only as a physical creature living in the elemental world of the senses but also as an angelic being.

## Conclusion

In its simplest terms, theology is the knowledge of God, or, following W. C. Smith, an attempt to be truthful when speaking about God. In the Bahá'í community, the discipline of theology as a form of scholarship would appear, ironically, to have been seriously underrated. There is currently a pressing and on-going need for theological works by scholars to make Bahá'í theology not only credible in the eyes of those academics engaged in religious studies but also an intellectual enrichment for those members of the community who would like to explore Bahá'í teachings in greater depth. The fundamental teaching of the oneness of religion, for example, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá declared in 1911 in his first public talk in the West to be "the gift of God to this enlightened age" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 19) and progressive revelation, which are both linked to the metaphysical paradigm of unity and the relativity of religious truth, have received almost no scholarly exploration after the passage of some eighty years.

Bahá'í theology necessarily will evolve beyond its present piecemeal treatment of metaphysical themes until systematic theologies are developed. Beyond that point, however, it is likely that truly universal theologies will emerge and will synthesize the religions of East and West, theologies that will be viewed as the epitome of sacred study for the age. For if, as Shoghi Effendi has written, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* "has laid down a broad and unassailable foundation for the complete and permanent reconciliation" of the followers of the world's great religions (*God Passes By* 139), Bahá'í scholars will be required to bend their minds to the development of theologies that are able to reconcile the spiritual teachings of the Orient and the Occident.

Finally, the following statement of Raimundo Panikkar, the noted comparative religionist, which could be read almost as a supplication for the intervention of a prophetic figure in our time as a way out of the tragic dilemma in which we find ourselves, will strike at the same time a responsive chord and a note of pathos for members of the Bahá'í Faith:

Great perceptive, prophetic figures and thinkers have appeared, yes, but scarcely any of the stature of a Śakyámuni, a Zarathustra, of a Confucius, any of the stature of a representative of the whole course of the age, any in a position to guide, "sublimate," cause to "precipitate" (in the chemical sense of the word), or at least to assist at the birth of, the "new mankind" still in gestation.... What is needed today is a force that, in the old traditional schema, could be defined as prophetic"—in order to search out, with the authority of the fully lived personal experience, a path to the altogether human assimilation and vanquishing of the new, dehumanizing positions imposed by contemporary civilization.... (*Silence* 93)

A Persian nobleman proclaimed in the last century to be such a one. His person, life, teachings, and community provide us with more than adequate proof of his mission. We have only to wonder why Bahá'u'lláh's voice has not yet been heard in the sacred academy of the proponents of world theology.

## Notes

1. It was an allusion by Moojan Momen to Browne that first drew my attention to this passage. Browne “commented on the fact that there is little in the corpus of works about that [Bahá’í] faith that can be described as systematic theological or metaphysical writing” (“Relativism” 185).

2. The four legal schools (*madháhib*; sing. *madhhab*) are: (1) the *Hanafíte* school, founded by Abú Hanífa (d. 767); (2) the *Malakite* school, founded by Málik ibn Anas (d. 795); (3) the *Sháf’íte*, founded by *Sháf’í* (d. 820); and (4) the strictest and most conservative *Hanbalite* school, founded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855). Actions that might be considered lawful or unlawful are divided into five categories: (i) obligatory, (ii) prohibited, (iii) recommended but not obligatory, (iv) indifferent, and (v) disapproved but not forbidden.

3. To put a more optimistic light on Schaefer’s comparison, we have to bear in mind that demographically the Bahá’í Faith is working from a very broad base, the entire planet. It has taken longer, therefore, to lay down its root system of communities.

4. The complete quotation is: “In this new and wondrous Cause, the advancement of all branches of knowledge is a fixed and vital principle, and the friends, one and all, are obligated to make every effort toward this end....”

5. Aristotle refers to “the one and the many” in *Metaphysics*, Book Iota, in which he says: “The one and the many are opposed in several ways, one of which is the opposition between the one as the indivisible and the many as the divisible; anything that is divided or divisible is called a plurality, whereas the indivisible or undivided is called a unity” (205-6). The source of the problem of “the one and the many,” however, predates Aristotle. The early Greek philosopher Heraclitus first raised the question of the one and the many. Parmenides, Melissus, and Zeno also explored the problem.

6. The situation is already changing. Udo Schaefer has written an instructive article on Bahá’í ethics for the forthcoming Bahá’í encyclopedia. Dann J. May’s master’s thesis, entitled “The Bahá’í Principle of Transcendental Unity and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism” (1993), defines Bahá’í theology more closely through an examination of the concept of faith and the two-fold (spiritual/social) nature of religion. In the light of scholarship, he also critiques “radical pluralism” and examines the grounds for belief in a unity of religions.

7. See n. 22 below.

8. It is understood by the term “Bahá’í theology,” that a diversity of theologies are possible. I will, however, use the singular throughout this article.

9. The “divine milieu” is an expression I have borrowed from *Le Milieu divin*—the title is usually retained in translation—one of the seminal works of the French Jesuit and vital evolutionist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. By the “divine milieu,” I mean not only God or a doctrine of God but also all human perceptions of God and the various forms of spirituality.

10. Drewek is echoing in her remark a long-established view of idolatry dating back to ancient Judaism, Islam, St. Paul, and Luther, among others. In his article “Idolatry in Comparative Perspective,” Wilfred Cantwell Smith, one of the founders of interreligious dialogue, points out that theologies, which he defines as “conceptual images of God” (56), can also be idolatrous and should be distinguished from the transcendence of God: “Thus even for those few nowadays who do not make the recent error of reifying their religion, it is nonetheless easy to idolize the conceptual content of a theological position or tenet.... Some intellectuals would in this fashion absolutize—idolize—the role of rational *propositions*—a still lower form of the rational” (60). Smith’s remarks are pertinent to any theologizing, Bahá’í or other.

11. This poetic phrase appeared in one of the responses to an informal opinion survey on Bahá’í theology that I conducted. It is similar to one of Mao Tse Tung’s sayings pertaining to the cultural revolution of “letting a hundred flowers blossom . . .” (speech in Peking, Feb. 27, 1957).

12. That is, purely rational human attempts to understand God outside of revelation. For Barth, revelation meant the Christian revelation exclusively.

13. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Toward a World Theology*. Smith writes: “Throughout I have spoken of ‘theology’, never of ‘Christian theology’. Indeed, the phrase ‘Christian theology’, once one stops to reflect about it, is a contradiction in terms.... Historically, however, it is the phrase ‘Christian theology’ that, rather, is recent, odd and finally untenable. It is virtually unknown before the nineteenth and rare before the twentieth century” (70). “There may be an attempt at Christian theology; and indeed there should be. An attempt at Christian theology, on the other hand, is too narrow a goal; and in the end, is self-contradictory” (71).

14. The classical expression of dogmatic theology deals preeminently with the life, works, and person of Christ as expressed in the dogmas of the incarnation and the trinity, questions that preoccupied the Church for the first five centuries.



15. Comparative religionist Huston Smith describes post-modernism as a rejection of all systems and worldviews: “Doubting that a deep structure exists, it settles for the constantly shifting configurations of the phenomenal world” (“Postmodernism’s Impact” 262).

16. Comparative religionist Raimundo Panikkar mentions the “surfeit of opinions” that both Western and Eastern scholars hold about the Buddha’s teachings including that of atheism or agnosticism. Panikkar cites von Glasenapp (*Buddhismus und Gottesidee*), Junjiro Takakusa (*The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy*), Haridas Bhattacharaya (*The Foundations of Living*), and G. van der Leeuw (*Phänomenologie der Religion*) as having affirmed the atheism of Buddhism (*Silence of God* nn. 6, 14, p. 179). Panikkar treats the Buddha’s “atheism” and “agnosticism” in the chapters entitled “Buddhism: Atheistic Religion” (16–23) and “Religious Atheism” (92–100). See also “Agnosticism” (9– 10) and “Negation of Being: Atheism” (122–129). Panikkar maintains that the conviction of agnosticism is more widespread among scholars than that of atheism (*Silence* n. 5, p. 179). Far from supporting the notions of the Buddha’s agnosticism and atheism, however, Panikkar maintains that the Buddha cannot qualify either as an agnostic or an atheist: “But Buddha never stated that he was an agnostic. On the contrary, his whole comportment was that of the ‘Enlightened One’, indeed, the one who knows, who has seen, who has ‘arrived’. The Buddha never entertained the least doubt as to his own position and solution. The Buddha knows. He knows, and makes manifest, the road to salvation. Nothing could be further removed from the attitude of an agnostic” (*Silence* 9–10). On Buddha’s so-called atheism, Panikkar states that the Buddha defended himself against such a charge: “The Buddha has not affirmed God, but neither has he denied God. On the contrary, as we have seen, he defended himself against the latter accusation ever more earnestly than against the former” (174). “God remains obscure, unknown, incomprehensible, mysterious. On his salvation journey, Śákyamuni prescinds [leaves out of consideration] from God.... The Buddha is silent of God” (175). Further on the basis of the following passage, one could argue that the Buddha rejected nihilism, one of several versions of atheism: “Wrongly, basely, falsely, and without foundation do certain ascetics and Brahmins accuse me, saying that Gautama the ascetic is a nihilist, and that he preaches annihilation, destruction, and nonexistence. Such I am not, such I do not assert. Today, monks, as before, I proclaim one thing alone: sorrow, sorrow’s destruction . . .” (*Mahihima-nikáya* 1:139, in Fatone, *Nihilismo buddhista* 30, quoted in Panikkar, *Silence* 10).

17. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* states: “The term theology as used here does not necessarily imply a belief in ‘God’” (s.v. “comparative theology”). See also, for example, Paul Ramsey, “Religious Aspects of Marxism.” What Ramsey does here is to take several key Marxist notions such as the function of the State, materialistic and economic determinism, the passion for social justice, ideology, the Marxist interpretation of history, and reinterpret them sociologically in the light of Christian theology, using such notions as the kingdom of God, biblical faith, the overlordship of God, and the Christian notion of sin.

18. Panikkar refers to the “numerous works and translations of Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids” that espouse this point of view. The pertinent texts can be found in G. R. Welbon, “On Understanding the Buddhist Nirvana” quoted in Panikkar, *Silence*, n. 30, p. 180. In the Bahá’í perspective, the Buddha first promoted the belief in one God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says of the Buddha, “He established the Oneness of God, but later the original principles of His doctrines gradually disappeared, and ignorant customs and ceremonials arose and increased until they finally ended in the worship of statues and images” (*Some Answered Questions* 165).

19. Such a comprehensive view of theology is that of F. R. Tennant. Tennant writes: “It [theology] also includes the comparative study of religions and the psychology of religious experience” (s.v. “theology,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Tennant elaborates on his view of theology as a comprehensive science in his two-volume work *Philosophical Theology* and in *Philosophy of the Sciences* where he writes: “Theology is not an isolated nor an isolable science; it is an outgrowth of our knowledge of the world and man. Revealed theology presupposes natural theology, and natural theology has no data other than those which experience supplies to science” (187). Tennant’s view of theology is somewhat atypical, and it also separates theology from dogmatism and confessionality.

20. During a talk at Eighth Street Temple, a synagogue in Washington, D.C., ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said: “Praise be to God! You are living in a land of freedom. You are blessed with men of learning, men who are well versed in the comparative study of religions. You realize the need of unity and know the great harm which comes from prejudice and superstition.... This [prejudice] must be abandoned, and the way to do it is to investigate the reality which underlies all the religions” (*Promulgation* 410).

21. F. Max Müller, in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), one of the seminal works in comparative religion, used “comparative theology” to refer to the beliefs of Hinduism and Buddhism as well as to the gods of Greece and Italy and those of ancient Scandinavia in the light of comparative philology and the history of religions. Today “comparative theology” usually refers to a comparative study of the theologies of two or more

of the world's religions. This approach recognizes religious pluralism. See "comparative theology" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14.

22. The term "world theology" forms part of the title of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *Toward a World Theology*. Smith posits a unity among the world religions: "Those who believe in the unity of mankind, and those who believe in the unity of God, should be prepared therefore to discover a unity of mankind's religious history" (4). Smith's view of the unity of the religions seems to lie in the vision that there is a historical interconnectedness among the world religions, in a larger way than, for example, all Christians share a common history. He does not affirm that "A equals B, or even resembles it" (5), that is, that all religions are the same. He looks upon religious unity as some sort of world history of the religions, in which the religions have "grown out of" or been "influenced by" one another (5). The tapestry analogy comes to mind. All religions are seen as strands that form part of a larger pattern. In part three of his book, Smith puts forward the view that there cannot be any valid theology of another religion by an observer, no matter how generous he or she may be. Only the participant can theologize. It is not valid for one to objectify another's faith. For Smith, "world theology" would mean that we all see ourselves as participants in one community. "World theology" would be a theology of the religious history of humankind. A major obstacle in praxis persists however. What will induce the adherents of the world faiths to abandon their absolutist convictions and embrace the new world theology, even if such a theology were to be satisfactorily worked out? One can certainly concur with Smith, however, that we attempt to work out a theology of the whole.

23. "The Book of Creation is in accord with the written Book.... The Book of Creation is the command of God and the repository of divine mysteries" (*Makátíb* 436–37). Unpublished in English. Cited by Bahíyyih Nakhjavání in *Response* 13. The Bahá'í writings even speak of a third book, that of "man": "Man is said to be the greatest representative of God, and he is the Book of Creation because all the mysteries of beings exist in him" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 236).

24. It hardly needs to be stated that theology (Gk. *theos*=God, *logia*=word) means speaking about God. God-talk is not a theological school of thought. It is simply a way of deflating the more onerous word *theology*. I, for one, however, share Wilfred Cantwell Smith's view that the colloquial expression "God-talk" trivializes theology. In an essay devoted to universal theology ("Theology and the World's Religious History"), Smith asserts that "theology is speaking the truth about God" ("Theology" 54). Smith also makes the point that virtually every people on the face of the earth has talked about God, but relatively few have elaborated theologies which are "systematic" and "rigorous." He also states that "theology is as much more than talk about God as logic is more than talk in general" ("Theology" 53).

25. Adolph von Harnack (1851-1930) makes the point that one of the original meanings of dogma was that of a revealed doctrine: "But the moment in which the product of theology became dogma, the way which led to it must be obscured; for, according to the conception of the church, dogma can be nothing else than the revealed faith itself" (*History of Dogma* 1: 9). See also p. 15, where he makes the same point: "But they [Christians] differ from such a school in so far as they have always eliminated the process of thought which has led to dogma, looking upon the whole system of dogma as revelation...." Von Harnack's seven-volume *Dogmengeschichte* (History of Dogma) is a classic in the field.

26. Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Islamic tradition: "Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá'im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 255). And also, "The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70).

27. "These principles and laws, [of the world's religions] these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are the rays of one Light" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 287-88). Also: "From the days of Adam until today, the religions of God have been made manifest, one following the other, and each one of them fulfilled its due function, revived mankind, and provided education and enlightenment" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 51).

28. Since the coined phrase "source theology" could be interpreted in various ways, I add here a word of clarification. By "source theology" I intend two basic and familiar ideas: that revelation is the source of theology and that revelation is theological in content. I fully recognize, nonetheless, the dependence of theology on revelation and do not infer from "source theology" that theology is equal to revelation.

29. There is, however, an article on mysticism in the forthcoming Bahá'í encyclopedia. See also Moojan Momen's "The Psychology of Mysticism and its Relationship to the Bahá'í Faith." Momen's views on mysticism appear to be ambiguous. The reader is not sure whether Momen is simply anticipating criticism from those who would reduce mysticism to mental pathology, or whether he questions the validity of mystical experience itself. The

research he cites involves psychiatric patients with severe personality disorders such as schizophrenia, or states of mind induced by such drugs as L.S.D., mescaline, alcohol, and diazepam. Momen underscores, however, that he is not saying that mental pathology or drugs can produce genuine mystic states, but rather that there are some common objective features between mystical states of mind and those induced by drugs and mental disorders (“Psychology” 11). Further, science can make no value judgment as to the “truth” of mystical experience (“Psychology” 11). Momen concludes by advocating a “middle position” between the pro- and anti-mystical positions, somewhere between “the monist pathway in trances” on the one hand, and “codes of rationalism and positivism” on the other, which will satisfy our needs for “creativity, fulfilment and advancement” (“Psychology” 20).

30. The relativity of religious truth is a large question, and limitations of space exclude an in-depth treatment of the subject. In addition to giving a brief account of how relativity relates to the Bahá’í view of progressive revelation, and following Langdon Gilkey’s understanding, I basically address the question of the interplay between the absolute nature of our religious beliefs and values and how these are relativized in interreligious dialogue. I have not addressed here certain key parameters of the discussion. Such questions as the relative and subjective viewpoint of the observer, the immutability of spiritual truth, the metaphysical unity of the prophets which Bahá’u’lláh qualifies as “absolute,” the whole question of the nature of God as the Absolute, the relative and absolute nature of spiritual values and experiences, and the concept of the absolute as a unified field of reality, have been largely omitted, although there are references to some of these.

31. Moojan Momen treats the relativity of religious truth in “Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics.” Following the progressive revelation line of reasoning, Udo Schaefer also treats relativity in “Die Relativität der Offenbarung” (The Relativity of Revelation) 116-20 (untranslated). Nader Saiedi also deals with relativity in order to relate it to a view of progressive social reality in “A Dialogue with Marxism” 242-46.

32. The above is the more well-known translation. John Mansley Robinson translates the complete and obscure proposition that is found in Protagoras’s *On Truth* thus: “Of all things the measure is man: of existing things, that they exist; of nonexistent things, that they do not exist” (*Introduction* 245).

33. See Protagoras’s response to Plato’s critique in Robinson, *Introduction* 247.

34. Reacting to Protagoras’s affirmation of the subjectivity of perception, and through Socrates’ voice, Plato makes a personal criticism of the Sophist, viz. if no one opinion is better than another, and if all opinions are true, how can Protagoras presume to teach other people and to charge them “huge fees”? Plato also indicated that with his relativity of sensations, Protagoras was making no distinction between the human being and the animal. Why not, therefore, take the animal as the measure of all things? (See Robinson, *Introduction* 246). Plato maintained, however, that in contrast to mere fluctuating opinion, there was sure knowledge and fixed concepts authoritative for all—his doctrine of the Ideas.

35. “Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists” is not a translation of *Lamentabili Sane Exitu*, which translates as “with truly lamentable results.” The titles of papal encyclicals are not always translated, and they usually bear as their title the first few words of the papal letter. Even though relativity or relativism is not mentioned by name in the syllabus, its condemnation is implicit in numbers 58, 59, 62, 63, and 64 of the missive. No. 58 reads, for example, “Truth is no more immutable than man himself, since it evolved with him, in him, and through him.” No. 59 reads, “Christ did not teach a determined body of doctrine applicable to all time and all men, but rather inaugurated a religious movement adapted or to be adapted to different times and places.” No. 59 is almost certainly aimed at Alfred Loisy, whom the church excommunicated in 1908. The letter was written as a reaction to the growing and influential conclusions of scholars engaged in scriptural exegesis and historical research that cast doubt on fundamental Catholic dogmas.

36. Niebuhr recognized that our spiritual convictions were determined by historical relativism: “The patterns and models we employ to understand the historical world may have had a heavenly origin, but as we know and use them they are, like ourselves, creatures of history and time; though we direct our thought to eternal and transcendent beings, it is not eternal and transcendent; though we regard the universal, the image of the universal in our mind is not a universal image” (*Meaning* 10). His view of relativity, however, did not culminate in unbridled subjectivity and a skepticism that undermine one’s basic convictions: “It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees” (18).

37. In *The Meaning of Revelation*, Niebuhr uses the phrase “progressive revelation” to refer to a continuous working out of the meaning of revelation in the on-going history of the human community: “...by being brought to bear upon the interpretation and reconstruction of ever new human situations in an enduring movement, a single drama of divine and human action” (135–36). On the individual level, it refers to a continuing understanding, reconstruction, and unity of the self in a dialectic of the ever-widening circle of reason and experience in understanding “first principles.” This understanding of “progressive revelation” points to a moment of mystical

illumination of the heart that Niebuhr likens to the journey and the mountain ascent during which there are moments of “new understanding,” “wonder,” and “surprise” (137). Söderblom’s view of revelation was something he called “continued revelation.” His Gifford Lectures, published as *The Living God*, held that revelation was ongoing in the creative genius, in secular history, and in the regeneration of the individual.

38. The context is Bahá’u’lláh’s affirmation that the Manifestations of God are the greatest sources of the mercy and grace of God, and the appearance of these “clouds of Truth” has had no beginning and will have no end.

39. Among the practitioners of world theology, the word *relativity* is preferred to *relativism*, which results in skepticism. While David J. Krieger points to the limitations of relativism, he is also aware of the dangers of “imperialistic objectivism.” See “The Problem of Ideology” and “Objectivism versus Relativism in Intercultural Understanding” in Krieger, *The New Universalism*. For Panikkar, relativism is “a premature renunciation of any attempt to make valid assertions. Relativism is pessimistic. It surrenders all possibility of arriving at any criteria of truth” (*Silence* 134).

40. For an elucidation of the “primordial tradition,” see Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth*. See also Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*.

41. See n. 45, reference to American idealist philosopher Josiah Royce.

42. With memories of World War II fresh in his mind, Popper launched a particularly and uncharacteristically virulent *ad hominem* attack on Hegel in Hegel and the New Tribalism” *passim* 27–81. Popper maintained that Hegel’s philosophy of the Absolute deified the State because he wanted to curry the favor of Prussian emperor Friedrich Wilhelm III who was his employer; that he favored absolute monarchy above a more liberal constitutional form of government; that Hegel claimed that the emerging German nation was about to triumph over other European nations in a coming culmination of the dialectic of history, and that warfare was the acceptable means of advancing the dialectic; that his doctrines led to a “new tribalism or totalitarianism” and racialism. Shoghi Effendi, writing earlier than Popper in 1936, and in strongly worded language, also presents succinct summary arguments against Hegel, several of which are substantially identical with Popper’s (*The World Order* 182–83). Shoghi Effendi, however, portrays Hegel as making a fifth-column attack against the Christian church, an attack which Shoghi Effendi claims was upheld by “Christian rulers and governments” (182). Shoghi Effendi also connects Hegel’s doctrine with the materialistic philosophy characteristic of secular modernism, which also alienates religion from daily life (183). It is difficult to determine whether Shoghi Effendi’s remarks about Hegel were based on his own reflections on European history and political theory, or whether he was echoing the views of British anti-Hegelians with whom he may have become familiar while he was a student at Balliol College, University of Oxford, 1920–21. British philosopher and sociologist Leonard Trelawney Hobhouse (1864–1929) published *The Metaphysical Theory of the State: A Criticism* in 1918, which was the main British anti-Hegelian critique of its time.

43. This notion of Bahá’u’lláh’s possessing the standard of truth is a repeated theme in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. He makes such a weighty but nonetheless unambiguous claim in a tablet addressed collectively to the leaders of religion: “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” (*Gleanings* 198).

44. Hegel’s notion of the Absolute Idea was typically ambiguous. According to Popper, the Absolute Idea in Hegel is just too big to be meaningful. It is “all in one, the Beautiful; Cognition and Practical Activity; Comprehension; the Highest Good; and the Scientifically Contemplated Universe.” Popper adds a note of irony: “But we really need not worry about minor difficulties such as these” (*Open Society* 36–37). For further criticism of the Hegelian view of the Absolute Idea or Absolute Reality, see Bertrand Russell, “The Limits of Philosophical Knowledge” 82–88. Russell critiques Hegel’s understanding and use of the concept of “nature” to reject Hegel’s view that the universe forms a “single harmonious system” (84). Russell proposes a more “piecemeal investigation of the world,” an approach he claims is “in harmony with the inductive and scientific temper of our age” (84). Like Popper, he also notes: “Hegel’s philosophy is very difficult, and commentators differ as to the true interpretation of it” (82).

45. Royce pursued the question of reconciling a personal God with the Absolute in *The World and the Individual*. Frederick Coplestone sees, however, an ambiguity in Royce’s use of the term “individual” and in his relationship of the One to the Many. See Coplestone, “The Philosophy of Royce” 42–44. According to Coplestone, Royce was, however, aware of the ambiguities in his own position. It remains, however, a matter of dispute exactly how his absolute idealism changed in later years in an attempt to reconcile previous ambiguities (Coplestone, “The Philosophy of Royce” 8, 44). Royce asserts the paradox of the one and the many, which is perhaps the only way out of the logical dilemma of reconciling the one with the many, a kind of *coincidentia oppositorum* à la Nicholas of

Cusa (1401–1464), the mystical view in which all contradictions meet and are resolved: “Simple unity is a mere impossibility. God cannot be One except by being Many. Nor can we various Selves be Many, unless in Him we are One” (Royce, *The World and the Individual* 2:331, quoted in Coplestone, “The Philosophy of Royce” 8, 42). Royce’s personal view of the Absolute is revealed in passages such as this: “We long for the Absolute only in so far as in us the Absolute also longs, and seeks, through our very temporal striving, the peace that is nowhere in Time, but only, and yet Absolutely, in Eternity” (*The World and the Individual* 2: 386).

46. Reinhard Pummer explored the question of terminology at length in “Religionswissenschaft or Religiology?” In a very detailed article examining the terminology, Pummer defends the traditional German term *Religionswissenschaft* against the newcomer “religiology,” which such scholars as R. A. McDermott, H. Kishimoto, L. Rousseau, and R. Bourgeault claimed was an equivalent of the German term. Pummer rejects this contention on the basis that “religiology” has pastoral, philosophical, and ecumenical concerns that are not part of *Religionswissenschaft*, which is strictly a historical-philological and empirical study. Pummer is not opposed to the concerns of religiology, but he contends that the term itself can not be justifiably equated with *Religionswissenschaft*. “Religiology” has not succeeded in becoming part of the language.

47. The point is not entirely speculative. Generally, idealism posits at its basis that reality is spiritual, that is, spirit or Spirit (God) is the ultimate reality and that the perceptions of the mind or the spirit of ideas are the essentials in epistemology. Some idealists held that spirit was not confined alone to nature and to the human mind, but expressed itself in religion through form, myth and symbol, and the arts. One school of idealist philosophers posited an ethical theism. Idealism raised the whole question of monism and plurality, which is very pertinent to Bahá’í theology. In its various forms of absolute idealism, personal and ethical idealism, and philosophies of spirit, idealism remains a strong current of philosophy that can sustain fruitful parallels to Bahá’í teaching.

48. Sir Arthur Eddington (*The Nature of the Physical World* and *Science and the Unseen World*) and Erwin Schrödinger (*What is Life?* and *Mind and Matter*) became the leading philosophical scientists of the New Physics that emerged between 1900–1930. The main tenet of a group of philosophical scientists in the 1930s that included Sir Arthur Eddington, Sir James Jeans, Bertrand Russell, and Alfred North Whitehead was “the stuff of the world is mind stuff” (Eddington, *Nature of the Physical World*). In other words, science not only is empirically tested matter but also depends on the perceptions of the mind itself. “Mind is the first and most direct thing in our experience; all else is remote inference” (*Science and the Unseen World*). The fact that the mind has some central role in perception is pure subjective idealism and is not far removed Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. Schrödinger, who created wave mechanics, also posited that there is only one Self or Mind in the universe. This one-mind theory is very close to the absolute idealist’s one Absolute Spirit (Mind) and the idealist’s claim that reality is based in the mind: “The overall number of minds is just one. I venture to call it indestructible since it has a peculiar time-table, namely mind is always *now*. There is really no before and after mind.... I also grant, should anyone wish to state it, that I am now talking religion, not science—a religion, however, not opposed to science, but supported by what disinterested scientific research has brought to the fore” (*Mind and Matter*).

49. I thank Moojan Momen for forwarding this text.

50. Stephen Lambden, referring to the original text, has pointed out that “the phrase ‘theological obscurities’ does not directly occur in the Persian. Rather, it forms part of an ‘interpretive paraphrase’ intended to highlight the fact that the Islamic divines (*ulamá*) remain uncertain about concrete (‘literalistic’) legalistic issues (*shar’íya*), yet they claim knowledge of the abstruse aspects of divine fundamentals. Reference to the *shar’íya* (=‘legalistic issues’) in the original Persian in other words seems to be non-literally rendered as ‘...the theological obscurities of their faith...’ “ (letter to the author). Bahá’u’lláh indicts the ability of the Muslim divines to fathom their scriptural tradition adequately in the light of the Prophetic hadíth: “Verily Our Word is abstruse, bewilderingly abstruse” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 82).

51. I thank Dann J. May for drawing this passage to my attention.

52. Schaefer’s use of the word *theology* comes up in his background discussion of the interface of theological and legal questions in the Bahá’í administrative order. He argues that any legal implications of the Bahá’í administrative order can be considered only in the sight of the theological and *metajuristische* (metalegal) content of Bahá’í teachings, a perspective that he also considers to be that of canon law: “Hierbei ist nicht zu vermeiden, daß auch auf theologische und metajuristische Fragen eingegangen wird. Die juristische Betrachtung und Erörterung kann vielfach erst einsetzen nach einer vorangegangenen Klärung der uns auf Schritt und Tritt begegnenden theologischen Fragen.... Ein solches Eingehen auf diese Fragen ist bei unserem Gegenstand umso unvermeidlicher, als es im westlichen Bahá’ítum zu einer systematischen, intellektuellen Durchdringung des geoffenbarten Stoffes, d.h. zur Ausbildung einer Theologie, auf deren Ergebnisse sonst verweisen werden könnte, noch kaum gekommen ist” (4–5). “In this case it is unavoidable that theological and ‘metalegal’ questions will also be considered. The

legal considerations and discussions can only be pursued in their various ways after a preliminary clarification of the on-going theological questions that we will encounter.... Such a consideration of this question [the theological one] is all the more unavoidable with our subject since the Bahá'í Faith in the West has not yet reached the point of a systematic, intellectual penetration of the content of the revelation, namely, the framing of a theology to whose results the reader could otherwise be referred" (translation mine).

53. Schaefer's recent book consists of two major essays in Bahá'í theology. In the first one *Endzeit oder Zeitwende? Versuch einer Standortbestimmung unserer Zeit* (The End of Time or Turning Point? Determining Where We Stand in Historical Time), Schaefer deals with the apocalyptic theme in both biblical and Bahá'í perspective to propose that we live, not in the age of universal destruction, but at a critical turning point in time that is characterized by new modes of thinking and new offers of salvation (*Heilsangebote*). Comparisons are drawn between the New Age movement and Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. In "Bahá'u'lláh's Einheitsparadigma und die Konkurrenz religiöser Wahrheitsansprüche" (Bahá'u'lláh's Unity Paradigm and Competing Truth Claims), and within the perspectives of pluralism and the history of religions, Schaefer treats the question of religious unity and diversity. He points out that although over the centuries there have been claims to uniqueness, exclusivity, and finality (especially in the Semitic faiths) that have caused suffering and misunderstanding, there have at the same time always been more liberal-minded representatives (*Vertreter*) in these same faiths who have opposed narrow dogmatism and have promoted an understanding and appreciation of other religions. Schaefer sees in the perspective of these enlightened souls the preconditions for the current interreligious dialogue and the starting point of a new theology characterized by the unity of the religions.

54. *Negative* here does not imply denial as it does in grammar. It means, rather, the lack of positive theological affirmations. Manifestation theology speaks. Negative theology is silent. See further below, pages 54–55.

55. For a provisional translation of the tablet that gives the historical background and very detailed commentary, see Stephen Lambden, "A Tablet of Mírzá Husayn 'Alí Bahá'u'lláh." Lambden reckons that the tablet is fundamentally an esoteric and Bábí piece of Qur'án commentary, interpreting the verse: "All food was lawful to the children of Israel (=Jacob) except what Israel made unlawful to himself (or, itself) before the Torah was revealed. Say: Bring the Torah and study it if you are upright persons' (3:87)" (6). According to Lambden, the metaphysical realms delineated in the tablet and outlined below are "well known in theosophical Sufism" (40), and treated, for example in Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* 270. The tablet is, however, far richer than the summary analysis I give below. Lambden interprets its esoteric and mystical references drawn from the Qur'án and the writings of both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, references that establish correspondences between the five grades of paradise and the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, on the one hand, and chromatic, numerological and root lingual configurations on the other hand (40–46). Moojan Momen indicates that the sources of the tablet are the Neoplatonic, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic. See "Relativism" 5:189. For the historical background of the tablet, as well as a summary, see Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 1:55–60.

56. In Christianity there is a strong apophatic tradition particularly among the Greek founders of the early Church. Selected statements are presented here. The gnostic Basilides, whose work survives only in fragments, is said to have taught that we should not even call God ineffable since to do so would be to make an affirmation about him (Tennant, *Philosophical Theology* 1:313, n. 1). Clement of Alexandria: "No one can rightly express Him wholly.... For the One is indivisible—without form and name." Origen: "According to strict truth God is incomprehensible and inestimable...whose nature cannot be grasped or seen by the power of any human understanding, even the purest and the brightest." Athanasius: "Although it be impossible to comprehend what God is, yet is possible to say what He is not." This last statement is pure apophasis. Gregory of Nyssa: "With regard to the Creator of the world, we know that He is, but deny not that we are ignorant of the definition of His essence." The founders of the Roman Church such as Augustine and Hilary of Poitiers (St. Hilaire de Poitiers) made similar statements, but they seem generally less impressed by transcendence than the Greek Church founders. See *Words about God*, passim 14–18. Although the concept predated him, the expression *via negativa* originated with the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus or Proculus (411–485). It was also used by Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500), John Scottus Eriugena (c. 810–880), Meister Eckhart (1260–1327), and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). (See "via negativa," *Encyclopedia of Religion*).

57. See n. 16 above. As well as the above references, Panikkar also treats the apophatic dimension as background to the Buddha's silence, in contradistinction to his presumed atheism, in "Ontological Apophasis" in *Silence* 101–47. Panikkar convincingly justifies the Buddha's silence about God. Here is one brief passage which indicates that the Buddha's silence about God was meant to indicate that God would not even classify as a "Being" in our normal understanding of the word, for God's Being would not be our being. Hence the Buddha's silence: "But there is also an *apophatic argument*, whose cataphatic expression translation would say that God is so great

that the greatness precludes existence, and precludes our conceiving the divine essence, transcending all our thoughts and all our forms of *thinking* being or even of *being*” ( 130).

58. In my explanation of the five stages of *Háhút*, *Láhút*, *Jabarút*, *Malakút*, and *Násút*, I have used Moojan Momen’s commentary on Bahá’u’lláh’s “Tablet of All Food” (*Lawh-i-kullu’t-ta’ám*) (Iraqi period) which he calls a “cosmology” (189) as my point of departure. Much of the commentary here, however, is my own. Readers who refer to Bahá’u’lláh’s original tablet will find it quite bald compared with Momen’s more elaborate interpretation. Stephen Lambden calls the same tablet a “mystical commentary” (“Sinaitic Mysteries” 110).

59. Bahá’u’lláh quotes a Muslim tradition attributed to ‘Alí: ““Absolute Unity excludeth all attributes”” (*Seven Valleys* 15).

60. *Vedanta* means literally “the end of the Vedas” and refers to that group of philosophies set forth in the closing portions of the Vedas and the Upanishads. Śankarā’s fundamental teachings were three: (1) Brahman alone is real; (2) the world is illusion; and (3) the individual soul (*jīva*) is Brahman.

61. In *Mysticism in World Religion*, Sidney Spencer takes these points from Śankarā’s *Vivekachudamani* (The Crest-Jewel of Wisdom) based on Charles Johnston’s translation (39).

62. Tillich sees the “God above God” as “the ultimate source of the courage to be” in his existential approach to the overcoming of anxiety and despair in an age of meaninglessness. Although his meaning of the “God above God of theism” is mystical and somewhat obscure, Tillich views it in the context of the paradox of the divine-human encounter. The God above God of theism would not be the objectified conceptualized God of theology but rather a transcending of that understanding: “They [believers] are aware of the paradoxical character of every prayer, of speaking to somebody to whom you cannot speak because he is not ‘somebody’, of asking somebody of whom you cannot ask anything because he gives or gives not before you ask, of saying ‘thou’ to somebody who is nearer to the I than I is to itself” (*Courage to Be* 181). Bahá’is will recognize in this last phrase reminiscences of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prayer, “Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself” The “God above the God of theism” lies in the mystical longing to reach such a God.

63. Cole makes the point that logos theology is common to the Christian, Islamic, and Bahá’í Faiths (“Concept of Manifestation” 8–9). One could also include Judaism as sharing this logos theology in view of the Jewish reverence for the holiness (Heb. *kadósh*) of Torah (“teaching”), as the word of God. Muhammad refers to the Jews as *Ahl-i-Kitáb* (People of the Book). No doubt they see themselves as the first people of the Book.

64. The word gloss has several meanings. I use it here to mean a technical or particular usage of a word.

65. Shoghi Effendí explained that he used the word *theophany* to mean Dispensation: “Theophany is used in the sense of Dispensation” (quoted in the first edition of *Lights of Guidance* n. 251, p. 82).

66. The word *theophany*, from the Gk. *theophania* “to make shine” or “to show God,” has two meanings that indicate the divine–human encounter in prophetic religion: (i) The transient, supernatural non-human manifestations of the divine, such as the Mosaic flame of angelic annunciation in the burning bush, or the pillar of cloud, or fire on Mount Sinai. (ii) More permanent human theophanies, such as the manifestation of God in Christ. See “Theophany” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*. See also E. Jacob, “Manifestations of God.” The Bahá’í understanding of the word suggests the permanent outpouring of spiritual guidance to humankind through the Word of God, in the person of the divine Manifestation.

67. The phrase *Mazhar-i-Iláhí* is taken from Twelver Shiism (See Cole, “Concept” 15–17). One cannot, however, use the term “Manifestation of God” to refer exclusively to the major prophets (Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá’u’lláh) or to distinguish them from the minor prophets. Although this would be convenient, it is not really justified. Bahá’u’lláh does not restrict his usage of “Manifestation of God” to refer exclusively to the revealers of new sacred scripture and laws. He also retains the traditional words Prophet and Messenger (*nabí*, *rasúl*) to refer to the higher prophets, as well as the minor ones. The same was true of Muhammad, who was referred to in the Qur’án as both *nabí* and *rasúl*.

68. For a fuller discussion of the Primal Will, see Brown, “A Bahá’í Perspective” 22–26.

69. Brown restates Theo Gerard Sinnige’s view in *Matter and Infinity in the Presocratic Schools and Plato* that the views of the Presocratic philosophers were first coherently stated in Plato’s *Timaeus* (Brown, “A Bahá’í Perspective” 18).

70. Brown develops the Bahá’í view that spirit is the origin of matter in “A Bahá’í Perspective.”

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