The Archeology of the Kingdom of God

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FOREWORD

The Occident has believed for several centuries that Islamic philosophy was lost in the sands of the
desert after the death of Averroes (Ibn Rushd)1. It required all the talent and erudition of Henri

Translator's Notes:
This electronic publication is with the permission of the author Jean-Marc Lepain, the translator, and the
publisher Kalimat Press.
As much as possible, a consistent use of bold, italics and underlining has been employed throughout this
volume in order to facilitate the ease of its perusal. All terms in Arabic and Persian are rendered in
italics, except for the names of persons and places and movements or communities, which will not be
italicized. All references to written documents, be they epistles (Tablets, letters), commentaries, articles
or books will be cited in quotation marks. Virtually no accents have been used in rendering the Arabic
and Persian words; the alternative to omitting accents was to be consistent in providing accents and that
would have entailed a great deal of unnecessary labor, which is not in any case conducive to a better

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Corbin to reveal to the French public, that at the very moment when the great Andalusian
civilization disappeared, and when the Maghrib (North Africa) and the Mashriq (Near East)
slumbered in torpidity, there appeared in Persia with Suhrawardi, a flowering of new Schools that
were to carry universal philosophy to one of its summits. In his principal work, "En Islam Iranien,"
Corbin has retraced for us all of this course from the first Suhrawardian treatises to the Shaykhi

School and he was one of the first to do justice to the founder of this School, Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i.
It is to be feared furthermore that our misunderstanding of the civilizations of the Orient is impelling
us to repeat the same injustice as our fathers, who imagined that Islamic philosophy perished with
Ibn Rushd, and that we continue to ignore the extraordinary spiritual revolution which Persia
witnessed in the 19th century.

An always greater number of studies published in the four corners of the world has progressively
shown us the historical importance of the Babi, and then the Baha'i movement, not only for Persia,
but in a general manner for the religious history of humanity. It is practically a unique case in which
independent observers have been able to observe the birth of a religion which has progressively
liberated itself from the cultural context in which it was born to take up a truly universal dimension.
The historical studies devoted to this phenomena, often based upon the analysis of the political and
social thought of the Baha'i writings, have moreover and for a long time masked from us the
philosophical importance of these texts, and their mystical dimension.

Historians have not been able to ignore the important consequences which the emergence of a
movement heterodox to Islam had in the Middle East, its repercussions upon the life of the States
and its diffusion well beyond the frontiers of the cultural world in which it was born. But it is feared
that insufficient attention has been accorded to the spiritual and philosophical bases of this
movement. If certain studies have been devoted to the influence of Baha'i ideas in the process of
social transformation, we do not know of any study of the mysticism, the metaphysics or the
philosophy of Baha'u'llah2. Certain articles have nevertheless permitted to see the richness which
this immense work contained, which is to a large degree unpublished.3

INTRODUCTION

1. Philosophical and mystical character of the work of Baha'u'llah

The work of Baha'u'llah represents one of the very rare attempts in several centuries to extract
philosophy from a problem born of the confrontation between Plato and

Aristotle; between platonic
idealism of which we know the heritage up to Hegel, and the pragmatic realism of Aristotle which

understanding of the text. Footnotes and endnotes already possessing the accents have been retained
without modification.
Translator’s Note: Baha’u’llah is the ceremonial, spiritual name adopted by Mirza Husayn ‘Ali Nuri.
‘Abdu’l-Baha is the ceremonial, spiritual name adopted by ‘Abbas Effendi, the eldest son of Baha’u’llah.
It is these ceremonial names that are already recognized worldwide, and so they are utilized throughout
this study. There are no capitalizations of personal pronouns, except in references to God.
See for example the article of Alessandro Bausani in “The Encyclopedia of Islam”; see also in the
Bibliography, the articles of Moojan Momen, Juan Ricardo Cole and Stephen Lambden.

impregnates the greater part of twentieth century philosophy; between the philosophies of
transcendence and the philosophies of immanence. In doing so, Baha’u’llah assigns philosophy a
new task, that of effecting the synthesis between the different modes of man's knowledge, between
the intuitive knowledge appropriate to his interior and his spiritual life, and the discursive knowledge
appropriate to empirical and scientific knowledge. For, finally, the purpose of philosophy is nothing
other than to permit man to know the reality of the universe and to know himself. In this sense, the
aim of philosophy is not different from that of religion and of science. Philosophy enables religion to
be intelligible to science and science intelligible to religion, and to create between them a fecund
dialectical relationship, capable of engendering almost increasing intelligibility, so that science does
not fall into the mire of materialism, so that spirituality does not lose itself in the swamps of
subjectivism, and so that religious tradition does not become fossilized in any form of dogmatism
[integrisme] blind and destructive to the interiority of man.

Attempting to discover this philosophy of Baha’u’llah is not an easy affair, for the work of
Baha’u’llah is of an essentially mystic nature. It speaks to the heart

before speaking to the rational faculty. It affirms itself to be impenetrable to him who is not engaged in the path of his own interior transformation. Furthermore, this bewildering work was composed in Persian and in Arabic at a time when these languages did not yet employ the modern terminology with which they are endowed today, and it is expressed in a style close to the literary conventions of that time and in a language marked by centuries of a culture which, in the eyes of many Westerns, appears today to be disused.

The result is that the reader who opens for the first time a work by Baha'u'llah, not knowing his intuitive and quasi-gnostic method of depicting things, could believe that this was just another of those books of Oriental spirituality which teach nothing that is really new. The result risks being worse yet if this is a specialist in Persian or Arabic literature, for he will be tempted immediately to interpret these writings according to what he knows of the vocabulary and the phraseology of the Islamic philosophical schools, and to ignore thereby the new problematic evoked by Baha'u'llah.
Nevertheless, nobody can remain insensible to the poetic beauty of the writing of Baha'u'llah. This formal beauty has always accompanied the expression of the great visionaries, and it constitutes the most certain trait of a genius which transcends the expression of the words. If this reason was the only one, may it be sufficient for this work to merit being known by the general public.

We can regret that the French Orientalists have not played here their role and that they have preferred to ignore this magisterial work. To study it has necessitated a certain courage, for unfortunately, in all the countries of the Middle East, the work of Baha'u'llah is forbidden publication and his adepts are still persecuted. The censure and the repressive measures with which authoritarian governments afflict the work of a man who is deceased for over a century, demonstrate to what an extent this work has retained all of its actuality.

It is thus entirely regrettable that the French public, with the exception of certain apologetic or polemical works4, has not had the possibility of access to a comprehensive work

which presents him,

For example, in French: Hippolyte Dreyfus, “Essai sur le Bahá’ísme,” Charles Hakim, “Les Bahá’ís ou victoire sur la violence,” Charles Canuyer, “Les Bahá’ís.” Only the investigation of two French journalists, C. Gouvion and Philippe Jouvion, “Les Jardiniers de Dieu; A la rencontre de cinq millions de Bahá’ís” seems to be an investigation relatively free of all prejudices. For more detailed references see the Bibliography.

with all the necessary rigor, the life, the work and the thought of Baha’u’llah. Let us say right away, that for reasons which we have explained in the Foreword, this book does not have as its objective the filling of this gap. One could even accuse us of having undertaken this presentation by the wrong end of the opera-glasses (binoculars). The question of the ontology of the divine worlds can seem altogether minor in the work of Baha’u’llah. But this question, minor in appearance, permits us to raise a span of his metaphysics, while leaving aside questions which will certainly necessitate years of research before being settled.

This study will permit us, we hope, to put an end to a certain number of prejudices which are widely held by certain Orientalists or specialists in the religious sciences, who wish to situate Baha’u’llah in the category of “social reformers,” implying that for the rest, Baha’u’llah did nothing other than repeat a certain number of the common places of philosophy and of mysticism. Some have believed to find in him an important heritage of Falsafa and of Hellenistic philosophy, others have us look at Ibn 'Arabi, at Suhrawardi and at Sufism. This underlines the light in which for a long time we have remained concerning the metaphysical opinions of Baha’u’llah. This situation is explained by the fact that what most struck the Orientalists of the last century, like E.G. Browne, Baron Victor Rosen, Thomas Cheynes, Ignaz Goldziher and Armin Vambery, was the “progressive” character of the social ideas of Baha’u’llah. Even Hippolyte Dreyfus in his “Essai sur le Baha’isme” (1909), insists upon what he calls “the social import.” Those who wished to go further were

struck by certain
similarities in language and were contented with a superficial reading of a few texts.

As for similitudes of language, there obviously exist such between Baha'u'llah and the theological,
philosophical and mystical schools which preceded him. Baha'u'llah was born in a world which had
a rich cultural and spiritual tradition; he made use of all of the resources which were offered to him
by the culture of his time. It is thus normal that he should have recourse to the technical vocabulary
of philosophy and mysticism. But the danger is to believe that identified these terms, we have
necessarily progressed in our comprehension. Baha'u'llah often profoundly transformed the
meaning of the words and the expressions which he employed. He formulated his ideas with a great
prudence so as not to shock the conservative elements of society. This explains that he advanced
revolutionary ideas while at the same time using a formulation which gives them the appearance of
tradition and of orthodoxy. His metaphysic of the divine worlds gives us the best example of this.

He who approaches for the first time the original language of the text of the "Tablet of All Food"—
the text which will serve as the point of departure for our investigation—could believe that he is in
the presence of what is for him a very familiar vocabulary. This vocabulary is none other than that
of the "five presences" which constitute a theory which is well known in Islamic ontology-
cosmology, the origins of which are found in Ghazali and al-Makki, but the completion of which
was not achieved until some centuries after them. This theory, centered upon the Angelic World, or
"Malakut," had a great influence as much upon the Ishraqis and the later philosophical systems, as
upon Sufism which made an abundant utilization thereof. A somewhat hurried enquirer might then
conclude that Baha'u'llah's metaphysic of the divine worlds is directly related to this well-known
theory of the "five presences," and that apart from certain questions of nuance, his system does not
present anything original in comparison with what was said before him.

This first impression could be reinforced by the very abundant usage which

Baha'u'llah made of this
very particular vocabulary in numerous writings where we very frequently find the terms which
designate these worlds, like "Nasut," "Malakut," "Jabarut,"
"Lahut" and "Hahut." However, he who

would make the effort to study the texts in greater depth must face three principal problems. The
first is that in the "Tablet of All Food," as in other texts in which we encounter the same vocabulary,
the typology of the divine worlds is used in a context which has no metaphysical implication.
The second problem will arise if the enquirer perceives that there exist in the work of Baha'u'llah an
abundance of different worlds such as the world of the Visible and of the Invisible, the world of the
Command, the world of invention, and he will have the greatest difficulty in articulating these
worlds with the theory of the five presences. Finally, the enquirer would encounter a certain number
of metaphysical affirmations which are at the same time impossible to describe and totally
incompatible with the preceding theories. A more subtle approach will show us that Baha'u'llah has
made use of a typology of the divine worlds in a manner that is totally foreign to metaphysics, and
will show us that, in the case of the "Tablet of All Food," the utilization which Baha'u'llah makes of
this terminology is purely hermeneutical.

One of the fundamental aspects of the teaching of Baha'u'llah resides in his conception of the divine
Word and the mystical experience as a hermeneutic of the world. One of our efforts will consist
precisely in encompassing the meaning of this hermeneutics. We will see as well that the utilization
which Baha'u'llah makes of this typology is not limited only to this hermeneutical utilization. In the
course of our study, we will devote two chapters to the development of the nomenclature of the
divine worlds, from its Aramaic origins until its definitive elaboration in the seventeenth century.

This theological-cosmological conception was formed slowly as by sedimentation, and every epoch
has left its trace as much in its vocabulary as in its theoretical elaboration. But, that which strikes us

in the utilization of this typology by Baha'u'llah, is that it is not connected to a single specific period.
Sometimes Baha'u'llah utilizes the bipolarity "Nasut-Lahut" in a sense which is very Hallaj-like,
sometimes he seems to restrict his horizon to the triad "Nasut-Malakut-Jabarut" of Ghazali, sometimes
finally he seems to make allusion to a more evolved stage of typology. This brings us to bring to the
fore one of the characteristics of the Writings of Baha'u'llah. These do not allow themselves to be
enclosed in a system of language in which the words have a previously codified definition.

The definition of the metaphysical and mystical terms utilized by Baha'u'llah is not found in a norm
exterior to the work; it is not found even in the work itself as a whole, but is unceasingly redefined in
relation to each text. The meaning of the texts is rarely univocal. Baha'u'llah wanted an abundance
of meaning. For, as he said, not only is there a meaning for every enquirer, but furthermore there is
a meaning for each spiritual state which the enquirer is destined to traverse. The meaning of the text
is not found then in an absolute normative truth, but is relative to the subjectivity of each individual.

The work of Baha'u'llah can be read at different levels. That one who should wish to find there
nothing but inspiration, will penetrate it without difficulty if he does not allow himself to be blinded
by scholastic rationalism. That one who should wish thereafter to deepen this thought, will certainly
perceive that this is not easily enclosed by the narrow limits of our comprehension. From there open
two paths: that of the mystical enquirer who lets himself be guided by his intuition, and that of the
academic enquirer who will be rapidly confronted with a multitude of linguistic, philological,
methodological and philosophical problems of which we can only give here a vague idea. In any
case, we think that the voyage merits being undertaken.

2. Baha'u'llah, his life and his work

Baha'u'llah was born on 12 November 1817 in Tihran5. He descended from an illustrious family
which traced its heritage to a local dynasty, that of the Ispahbudan, and

through this, to the prophet Zoroaster. His ancestors had for a long time lived the life of country gentlemen in the district of Nur where they possessed important domains. The assumption of power by the Qajar dynasty in 1798, and the foundation of Tihran shortly thereafter, was to change the course of their life. The new capital and the royal court which was established there, lacked competent persons to make functional the machinery of the State. This new situation was to convince the grandfather of Baha'u'llah to install himself at Tihran, where he occupied important functions and where he ended in possessing a prosperous and influential position. His son, heir of his title of "High clerk" (Mirza Buzurg) and acquired the much sought after position of "vazir," a title which does not designate a minister as is all too often believed, but the special secretary and intendant of the finances of one of the princes who shared amongst them the government of the provinces of the Kingdom. Baha'u'llah was thus promised to the soft life of the court, having the choice either of assuming the quasi-hereditary charge of his father, or of living in leisure (idleness) due to the comfortable revenues procured from the villages which his family had acquired in the neighborhood of the capital.
However, something altogether different was to be the destiny chosen by him who was then known only by the name of Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri.

As often for those who are promised a great spiritual destiny, the signs of his election were manifested very early, at the same time by a penetrating intelligence, a temperament given to meditation, and a predisposition to defy social conventions. Baha'u'llah was but an adolescent, when already he did not hesitate to denounce social injustice, the corruption of certain political personalities and the hypocrisy of certain members of the clergy, to the point where the prime minister, embarrassed by such a disruptive person, dreamed of making him join his government in order to sober him, which, obviously, he refused.

When he attained seventeen years of age, Husayn 'Ali married Navvab, the daughter of another vazir [minister], who was to remain his faithful companion to the end of his

days. From this
moment, he decided to retire from public life, neglecting to appear at court, in order to undertake a
life entirely consecrated to meditation and to pious and charitable acts which were already noted by
the little people and which contributed to his nascent popularity.

A tenfold years flowed by in this way, when, on the [22nd] of May 1844, in the town of Shiraz an
event took place that was to upset the history of Persia, and the influence of which has perhaps not
yet been completely measured.

Some months earlier, Siyyid Kazim Rashti, the master of the Shaykhi School—which had been
founded forty years earlier by Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i—died at Karbala in 'Iraq. At the moment of
his death, Siyyid Kazim refused to name a successor. Upon his death bed he affirmed that the
hidden Imam, the Promised One awaited by all the Shi'is, the appearance of whom would
announce eschatological times, this Promise so much awaited, was already in the world. He

For the life of Bahá’u’lláh one can refer to the basic work of Shoghi Effendi, “God Passes By,” as well as to
the two biographies of Hasan Balyuzi, “Bahá’u’lláh, the Word made Flesh,” and “Bahá’u’lláh, King of
Glory,” which are very well documented.

ordained for his disciples to disperse as soon as he passed away in all directions, so that, perhaps,
God might guide those whose hearts were pure, that they might encounter him whom the true
Shi'is, for generations, had prayed to God to hasten for centuries in vain.

It is thus that a little group of disciples, conducted by Mulla Husayn Bushru'i, on [22] May 1844
entered the town of Shiraz. It is there, that, during the first evening of his sojourn, a young merchant
of twenty-[four] years, being called Siyyid 'Ali Muhammad, announced to Mulla Husayn, that he
was the Promised One: declaring that he was “the Bab”, that is to say “the Door”, and that he,
Mulla Husayn, was to be “the Babu'l-Bab”, that is to say “the Door of the Door,” through which
would enter all those who would believe in him. Finally he declared, that his mission carried a

universal message addressed to all the nations, faithful and infidel, without distinction of race or of belief, and that he came to announce the coming of one greater than him for whom he was charged only with preparing the way, “Him Whom God shall make manifest” (Man Yuzhiruhu'llah), for according to the Shi'i tradition of Islam, after the Qa'im—a term which one can translate by “He who arises” or “the Resurrector”—must appear the Qayyum, “the Eternal”, “the Ancient of Days”.

A short time thereafter, he announced to his first disciples his intention to go to Mecca to proclaim his mission to the Guardian of the sacred places there. During his absence, he asked them all to go from town to town announcing the appearance of the Promised One. Alone to Mulla Husayn, he confided a special mission. He gave him a letter and directed him to go to Tihran where divine inspiration would indicate to him whom he should remit this message. It is thus that having arrived at Tihran and having determined the identity of all the persons possessing remarkable degrees of wisdom or virtue, Mulla Husayn acquired the inner conviction that this message could not be addressed to anyone but Baha’u’llah. He went to his home and gave him the autograph message of the Bab in the presence of his brother Mirza Musa. Having taken account of the text, Baha’u’llah turned to his brother and declared:

“Musa, what do you say? In truth, I tell you, he who believes in the Qur'an, who recognizes its divine character, and who nonetheless hesitates, be it but for an instant, to admit that these moving utterances are endowed with the same regenerative power, is assuredly mistaken in his judgment and has deviated far from the path of justice.”6

From this moment on, and during the six years which followed until the martyrdom of the Bab at Tabriz on 9 July 1850, the life of Baha’u’llah was caught up with the Babi movement, the history of which we will not try to retrace here. During these six years, Baha’u’llah retained with the Bab this privileged relationship which had been so mysteriously inaugurated by the first epistle brought by Mulla Husayn. Shortly after his return from Mecca, the Bab was no longer

anything but a prisoner
relegated from prison to prison in places increasingly distant. It was the eighteen first disciples, called
“Letters of the Living” who administered the Babi community and Baha’u’llah who assured its
spiritual direction, while remaining in the shadow. His role was particularly crucial at the time of the
“conference of Badasht” where, at his initiative, the principal Babi personalities were gathered with
the intention of proclaiming the abolition of Islamic law and the total independence of the Babi
religion from Islam.

Nabil-i-Zarandi, “The Chronicle of Nabil” p. 101. Nabil-i-Zarandi who was the chronicler of Bahá’u’lláh,
bases himself on the memories of Mirza Musa, the brother of Bahá’u’lláh, in reporting this event to us.

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The Bab began by throwing into confusion Islamic theology and with reinterpreting the Qur'an in a
totally different manner than that of [Islamic] tradition. He explained that the resurrection of the
dead was not a resurrection of the body, but a spiritual resurrection which caused the believer to be
delivered from the death of this life to an eternal life that is purely that of the spirit. He taught that
neither paradise nor hell-fire existed, for what existed were spiritual states in which the believer was
more or less separated from God. He explained that the end of time was but an allegorical figure to
designate the end of a world, that is to say, of a cycle of civilization. Muhammad was presented as
the last of the “prophets” to prophecy (nabi), but not as the last of the “Messengers” (rasul), as attested
the expression “Seal of the prophets” (khatam al-nabiyyin) which applies to the minor prophets, the
nabi, and not to the appearance of a new law capable of abrogating that of the Qur'an and the
revelation of a new sacred text susceptible to be substituted to that revealed by the archangel Gabriel
to Muhammad. The signs of the end of time mentioned by the Qur'an were interpreted in a purely
symbolic manner.

All of his principles were thus of an unheard-of audacity. They upset Persian society more surely
than any political or economic reform could do so today. Daring to touch, even

in declaring himself
a prophet of God, what was considered one of the intangible principles of Islam, that God Himself
could not change, was to introduce a subversive element in human thought that, according to the
Persian clergy, no temporal or religious authority could tolerate.

The work of Baha'u'llah is not, of course, without kinship with that of the Bab. This does not mean
however that Baha'u'llah did no more than develop and explicate the message of the Bab. The work
of Baha'u'llah distinguishes itself from that of the Bab upon at least two levels. In first place, the
work of Baha'u'llah encompasses a political and social dimension which, without being absent in the
Bab, do not reveal the same character. An entire portion of the message of Baha'u'llah would be
centered upon the process of development of civilization with its cycles organized according to an
organic model, the interpretation in historical terms of the spiritual destiny of man, the finality of
human existence placed in the perspective of the social future, the advent of a world order which
integrates the vertical dimension of the transcendence with the horizontal dimension of the
development of civilizations, the relationship between the process of individuation and the process of
spiritualization, etc.

In second place, the work of Baha'u'llah does not appear to be as marked by Shi'i culture. In
"preparing the way" the Bab accomplished a work of "deconstruction". He liberated the Muslim
from secular prejudices cultivated by centuries of obscurantism. The first Babis were still prisoners of
the cultural model of Shi'ism. He lived the advent of this new Revelation like a repetition of the
drama of Karbala where the armies of the khalif Yazid killed the Imam Husayn and his family. He
taught them less to grasp the universal implications of this new message than to bring to light the
meaning of certain obscure verses of the Qur'an. Their thought was still turned towards the past.

The genius of the Bab was to have understood and to have provided his adepts a key which, once
mastered, gives a new meaning to history, justifies the endurance of sufferings, and reveals the

essentially transcendental value of the spiritual destiny of man. But it is Baha’u’llah to whom it was given to illuminate the future.

The proclamation of the Bab had an immense repercussion throughout Persia and even beyond. The new faith soon counted tens, then hundreds of thousands of adepts. Diplomatic dispatches

estimated that a third perhaps of the population manifested a penchant for the new doctrine7. The rapid progress of the new faith struck the Muslim clergy with panic, and everywhere they raised an immense clamor, called for holy war and declared that to spill the blood of the impious was a pious act. Even the Shah began to fear that such a powerful movement might only finish by taking his throne. The first martyrs fell. Bit by bit a climate of civil war was established.

The clergy, who had always contested the royal power, and who claimed to rule the life of the State as the only interpreters of the will of the hidden Imam, in order to save its influence and its privileges, sealed an unnatural alliance with the political power which it had so much denigrated. An immense repression was unleashed upon the entire population; a repression that was to result in more than twenty thousand deaths in the space of a few years. It was only at this price that the progress of Babism could be arrested. The Bab was shot, the “Letters of the Living” decimated, the elite of the movement hounded and delivered to the executioners to die in the most frightful and spectacular tortures. Every person found in the possession of a writing of the Bab was rendered with a sentence of death, to be executed immediately.

Towards 1852, Nasiri'd-Din Shah and the Shi'i clergy could believe that they had accomplished their aims. The mass of the people, whose fanaticism had been excited, and whose most base instincts had been solicited, had turned away from the movement, as soon as it had understood that the Babis were not disposed to take the lead in a social revolution against the feudal order. From this deception fifty years later the constitutional Revolution was to be born, which

seems to have been a
secularized version of the ideas of the Bab and Baha’u’llah, mixed with the theories of the Century
of Lights and of parliamentary democracy. Babism no longer existed except as a clandestine
movement of which the adepts were hounded everywhere.

It is then that took place a dramatic event which was to rebound the course of the story. In August
1852, two Babis decided to assassinate the Shah. The attempt failed. Nasiri'd-Din Shah, who up
until that time had exercised a certain moderation in the course of the repression, made the entire
Babi community responsible for this isolated act, and ordered the arrest and the more debased
tortures to death of all the Babis who could be found. A ringleader was sought behind the plot.

At this time, most of the “Letters of the Living” had already fallen as victims of the repression.
Suspicion fell on Baha’u’llah who appeared now to be the most important personality of the new
religion. Baha’u’llah was arrested and thrown into an underground hole which served to collect used
water, and which also occasionally served as a prison. A hundredfold criminals were already
detained there. Baha’u’llah was imprisoned there with some other Babis. Previously he had been
shackled with a fifty kilo chain about his neck, and his feet had been fettered to a truss to which were
attached other prisoners.

It is thus that he passed several months in the most frightful conditions, without hygiene, lacking air
and nourishment. The chains so deeply cut his flesh that all his life he retained the trace. Every day
the door opened to announce the names of those who were to be executed. Yet, it is in this noisome
hole that Baha’u’llah had a mystical experience of a great intensity which he considered as the start
of his mission.

7Moojan Momen, editor, “The Babi and Baha'i Religions, 1844-1944 : Some Contemporary Western

Accounts”, George Ronald, 1981.

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Baha’u’llah was an eminent personality, the issue of an influential family

having numerous
influences in the court; it was not easy to have him killed like a simple Babi. The commission of
enquiry did not find a single element to accredit the assumption of a plot, how much less so to
implicate him directly. Baha'u'llah had become an encumbrance, a prison who could neither be
declared innocent, nor condemned. Finally, the Shah signed an edict. Baha'u'llah was condemned
to be banished from the realm and his belongings were confiscated.

This winter of 1853 is the beginning of a long life of errancy, of successive banishments and
imprisonments. Baha'u'llah spent ten years in Baghdad, which were ten years consecrated to the
spiritual regeneration of the Babi community. Bit by bit a new nucleus of disciples constituted itself
around him who lived in an extraordinary fervor nourished by his teaching.

It is at Baghdad that Baha'u'llah wrote the "Book of Certitude" (Kitab-i-Iqan) which essentially treats
of prophetology, but engages also numerous aspects of the spiritual life, mixed with metaphysical
questions8. It is also in Baghdad that Baha'u'llah wrote perhaps his most popular book, "The
Hidden Words," which presents in an aphorismic form "the essence" of "that which hath descended
from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets
of old"9, that is the say the essence of the prophetic message common to all the religions; the
immutable laws at the basis of the spiritual development of man. This little masterwork, of a great
poetical beauty, merits by itself that we consecrate a study to him. Each one of the aphorisms which
he composed begin by apostrophes such as "O son of man!" or "O son of being!", or "O son of
dust!" which give to the prose its rhythm. One of the themes which permeates all of this work is the
mystery for man of the love of God:

"O son of being! My love is your stronghold. Whoever penetrates it has nothing to fear,
whoever turns away therefrom strays and is lost. O son of the Bayan! My stronghold is you;
penetrate it then to find yourself in the shadow. My love is in you: know it in order to find
yourself close to me."10

During the course of years, Baha’u’llah acquired considerable influence. The Babis disoriented since the death of the Bab came to draw a new inspiration from him. Many did not hesitate to undertake a long voyage on foot in order to encounter him whom the epistles, known under the name of “Tablets” (lawh, pl. alwah), began to circulate throughout Persia. His reputation for wisdom was known in all Baghdad. His house was permanently frequented by a crowd of people of all social classes who came at every hour to hear his teaching. The governor of Baghdad and the most influential personalities of the town perceived themselves honored to be among his friends. His renown grew every day, which did not fail to excite jealousies, to begin with that of the Shi'i clergy, who along with the Persian legation, set out to send alarming reports to Tihran.

English: Bahá’u’lláh, “Kitab-i-Iqan,” translated by S. Effendi Rabbani, Wilmette, 1989; French: “Le Livre de la Certitude,” translated by H. Dreyfus, 4th ed., Paris, 1973. See Bibliography for text in original (Persian) language.
English: “The Hidden Words,” Part One – Arabic, translated by S. Effendi Rabbani, Wilmette, n.d.;
French: “Les Paroles cachees,” ed. 1970, p. 3.
Ibid., p. 5.

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All efforts were made to convince the Shah that, from Baghdad, Baha’u’llah had plotted once more to foment a revolution in Persia and that he exercised a detrimental influence throughout the kingdom. Nasiri'd-Din Shah anxiously initiated negotiations with the Ottoman court so that Baha’u’llah would be sent further away in order to neutralize his influence. The effect was exactly the opposite of that sought. The Sultan 'Abdu'l-'Aziz of Turkey began to find interesting an exile who inspired so much anxiety in his rival the Shah of Persia, and asked himself if he could find him a role to play in his pan-Islamic political strategy, aiming to make himself recognized, to the great displeasure of the Shi'is, as the khalifah of all Muslims. It is thus that a firman (decree) was published requiring that Baha’u’llah render himself to the court of Istanbul. The

governor of Baghdad who
first received this decree was so dismayed by it that he waited several weeks, and reiterated
repetitions of the order, before daring to communicate the purport thereof to Baha’u’llah. This news
plunged the Babi community into consternation and Baha’u’llah himself announced in his Tablets
the dangers that this voyage would contain.

The departure of Baha’u’llah from Baghdad was to serve as the foundation stone of a capital event.
Baha’u’llah left the town in the midst of a considerable popular emotion, and retired to a garden
situated a short distance away where during nine days he was to receive the incessant flow of his
friends and his admirers who came to say their farewells. It is this precise moment that Baha’u’llah
chose to announce to a small group of disciples that he was the one of whom the Bab had
prophesied the coming, the Man-Yuzhiruhu'llah, “He Whom God shall make manifest”. From this
moment on, the Babi movement changed in its nature. During the space of some years the vast
majority of the Babis were to become Baha’is, and a new movement was to be stamped upon the
young Faith which was to know an unparalleled expansion which in less than a half-century was to
carry it beyond the frontiers of Islam and to have it take foot upon the five continents.

The voyage of Baha’u’llah from Baghdad to Istanbul was accompanied with all the pomp reserved
to the official guests of the monarchy, although Baha’u’llah knew that a tyrant and a prophet were
not made to understand each other. Having arrived at Istanbul, he voluntarily omitted to
accomplish the visits which were prescribed by protocol and he clearly made it known to the prime
minister 'Ali Pasha that he had no intention of supporting the politics of the Sultan. 'Ali Pasha had
the greatest respect for Baha’u’llah, but he could not resist the campaign waged by the
representatives of the Persian government who had but one fear, that Baha’u’llah would obtain the
allegiance of the Turkish princes and ministers. Sultan 'Abdu'l-'Aziz was burdened with a prisoner
who did not serve his politics and who was denounced every day for his activities dangerous to the

morality, the religion and the stability of the State. Finally, after having assured himself that there was no other way to corrupt him, the Sultan published a new decree of banishment. Baha'u'llah was informed that he must immediately leave Istanbul to render himself in Adrianople (Edirne) where he must live under a watchful guard.

At the heart of a particularly rigorous winter Baha'u'llah had to undertake by foot the voyage to Adrianople. This painful voyage was the beginning of a long series of tribulations and sufferings. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the difficult and precarious conditions of life in his status of deportee, Baha'u'llah was soon to win the heart of the population of the town. The immense distance which separated the Bulgarian frontier from Persian and from 'Iraq did not discourage pilgrims who began anew to arrive in numbers.

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The Epistles of Baha'u'llah circulated throughout the Orient and his preaching continued every day to win new adepts. All of that did not take place without difficulty. Baha'u'llah did not have only to face the opposition of the Muslim clergy and the incessant denunciations of the Persian ambassador Mirza Husayn Khan, but his enemies concealed themselves in the bosom of his own family. His own half-brother Mirza Yahya, better known under the name of Azal, consumed with jealousy, was the hand who was found behind these plots. He tried to poison Baha'u'llah, and this one was for several days between life and death.

Around Azal began to regroup a small number of Babis who accepted neither the changes, nor the authority of Baha'u'llah, and who, living a dissolute life, worked without ceasing to discredit Baha'u'llah before the authorities. They sent to Istanbul alarmist reports in which they accused Baha'u'llah of plotting with the Bulgarian tribes in order to foment a uprising against the Ottoman Empire. It was their actions which soon determined the authorities to transfer Baha'u'llah to a prison in which he would be submitted to a more severe control.

Shortly before his departure from Edirne, Baha'u'llah took up the writing

of a series of letters
addressed to the kings and directors of his epoch. These letters, completed by a series of admonitions
inserted in several of his works, have as they aim to announcement of the bewilderment of the world
which will mark the coming century and to proclaim the principles upon which a new civilization
could be established. Baha'u'llah announces that the present political and social order upon which
the world is founded is on its way out and already condemned and that a "new order" (nazm-i-badi')
is destined to follow it11.

The new order, made inevitable by eminent catastrophes and by a series of more and more difficult
tests for humanity, would be characterized by a collective system of peace between the nations. But
this peace could not be possible until man accepts a universal form of government and if social
justice reducing the extreme wealth and the extreme poverty could be definitively installed and
secured. Otherwise, adds Baha'u'llah, no political program can arrive at such a result, for the
directors do not have any means for efficaciously transforming society. The new civilization rests
upon a new system of values the nature of which is spiritual and the foundation religious. Only
religion, through the means of a new message, has the power to change the world, even as
Christianity and Islam have already done so. It alone can touch the hearts of people, transform their
vision of the world, make them accept a new system of values of which the rootedness of which must
be situated in the transcendence and the recognition of the spiritual nature of man.

This collection of letters, written for the most part between 1868 and 1871, is fairly astonishing in its
prophetic character12. Baha'u'llah assures that monarchy will provisionally disappear as a form of
government and that it will reappear later in a different form. He declares therein his preference for
a tempered democratic government and, in addressing Queen Victoria, he praises her for having
placed government in the hands of Parliament and for having abolished slavery13. Queen Victoria
was besides the only monarch to render a friendly response to Baha'u'llah.
English: "Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", translated by

S. Effendi Rabbani, Wilmette, 1982,
CXLIII; French: E.E.B., CXLIII, p. 291.
English: Bahá'u'lláh, "The Summons of the Lord of Hosts"; "The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh"; French:
"La Proclamation de Bahá'u'lláh," Bruxelles, 1967.
Ibid., pp. 31-32.

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Baha'u'llah affirms in these letters that universal peace will not be installed except by a pact of collective security that will be founded upon a plan of general disarmament negotiated during the course of an international conference in which all of the governments will be represented, as well as upon an international force to secure the peace14. He insists upon the urgency of this disarmament in Europe and upon the necessity of creating an international court of justice to which would be submitted all the differences between States for arbitration, and which alone would be able to authorize the usage of force.

Notwithstanding, underlines Baha'u'llah, a pact of collective security and a general disarmament are not sufficient to assure the basis of social development. He announces that the new civilization which he advocates cannot develop unless the foundations of society are profoundly shaken up to make the injustices which undermine it disappear and only on the condition that the new institutions be created whose aim is to administer the planet in a global fashion. He recommends the creation of a global parliament where will be represented not the States, but all of humanity, and where the deputies will not consider themselves the representatives of this or that nation, but as the representatives of the entire human race. From this Parliament will emanate a global executive charged with managing the great problems of international dimension. Implicitly, the political system of Baha'u'llah condemns the modern State such as it has been constituted since 1848.

These States, founded upon competing economic entities and given over to ethnic and linguistic unity, are for him the source of major potential conflicts. The security and the prosperity of humanity requires that these States renounce the greatest part of their

sovereignty for the sake of
international institutions which along have the capacity to install a global system of cooperation and
not of competition, of managing the planetary resources in the interest of all in such fashion that no
one people will be deprived, and to resolve problems which require the bringing together of
considerable means.

Among the most dramatic of the letters are those which Baha'u'llah addressed to Napoleon III. In
the first, he asks him to put into action his liberal proclamations. Legend reports that Napoleon
upon reading this letter declared: "If he is God, then I am God times two." Baha'u'llah replied with
a second letter in which he announces to Napoleon III that because of his attitude his empire will be
lost to him and will fall into confusion and that a revolution is on the verge of taking place in Paris15.
Some months afterwards there took place the defeat of Sedan and the Paris Commune. In
addressing Wilhelm II who had come to Palestine but who was deaf to his appeals, he announced
that war would bloody the shores of the Rhine twice and that Berlin would be ruined16.

In writing Pope Pius IX at the very moment in which the sovereignty of this one over the pontifical
states was being discussed and in which the Vatican position opposed for this reason the unification
of Italy, Baha'u'llah recommended not only to the Pope to abandon his States, but asks him to
renounce his palaces and his riches in order to live in the poverty of which Christ gave the example
all of his life. He condemns the celibacy of the priests, asceticism and the monastic life, and asks the

Ibid., p. 109.
Ibid., pp. 17-22.
Ibid., pp. 79-81.

monks and nuns to abandon their retreats in order to make themselves useful to society17.

Such letters were not made to attract much sympathy in the Western courts and without doubt they
were not destined for this purpose. They had no other aim than to make a date with history, and

one must say that history has given reason to him who wrote them. They are proof of a prodigious vision. More than a century afterwards, conferences on disarmament are part of actuality. In the Hague there is an international court of justice and a number of international treaties compose abandonments of sovereignty. The United Nations can be seen as a far-off precursor of a global Parliament which Baha'u'llah envisioned.

The interest inspired by these letters explains furthermore how the teaching of Baha'u'llah was reduced to this political and social aspect alone. In doing so, one commits a grave error and one misrepresents the foundation of his thought. The political and social teaching of Baha'u'llah is inseparable from his mystical and spiritual teaching. From this mystical and spiritual teaching derives a metaphysic and a philosophy of which the aim is first to elucidate the nature of man, to situate his finality in creation, in order to determine the rules of his interior evolution. It is only once one has elucidated these rules, that one can explore his spiritual interior in order to determine his potentialities, and that one can study the basis of society that will permit these potentialities to blossom.

There is a relationship of narrow dependence between the interior which is man and the exterior which is society. For it is by his interior that man constructs society. It is in mastering his impulses and in putting an end to the primitive interior chaos that he will infuse more order into the social reality. But the conquest of this interior order is far from being a purely discursive and rational process. It contains a mystical dimension which puts man in contact with transcendental and absolute values that he is destined to impregnate progressively, but the objective understanding of which escapes him.

The activities of Azal and of his partisans gave credit to the denunciation of the enemies of Baha'u'llah at the Ottoman court and convinced the Turkish government that Baha'u'llah was a prisoner whom it was dangerous to keep at Edirne, where nobody could assure his silence or control

his correspondence. It was wished to find for him a prison far from the great urban centers and from
the caravan routes where his voice could be smothered, and where perhaps he would die of
privation or of sickness. Having examined all the possibilities, the Ottoman government decided to
deport Baha'u'llah to what seemed to be the most backward, the most antiquated and the least
populated province of the Empire: Palestine. There was found the famous fortress of Acre, enclosed
on three sides by the sea, which even the canons of Napoleon [Bonaparte] could not conquer. It is
there that the worst criminals were sent, for the fortress was regularly ravaged by epidemics of
plague and cholera, and the prisoners rarely survived more than a few years under these conditions
of imprisonment. Actually, several disciples of Baha'u'llah were to die [there] during the first weeks
of their detention.

Arriving in Palestine in August 1868, Baha'u'llah did not leave this land until his death in 1892.
During the first two years, Baha'u'llah was made to submit to a particularly severe regime of
detention, but little by little the attention of the jailers relaxed, such that they themselves succumbed
Ibid., p. 91.

to the irresistible charm of their prisoner. When movements of troops rendered the fortress
necessary for their billeting, Baha'u'llah was transferred to a particular house destined to serve as his
prison and where he could live a little more comfortable life. As at Baghdad and at Edirne his
reputation did not fail to spread in the region and the notables began to come visit this strange
prisoner before whom they came seeking comfort or in quest of some words of wisdom.

It is there that Baha'u'llah wrote the most important of his books, the "Most Holy Book" (Kitab-i-
Aqdas) in which he formulated the essential laws of his religion18. From this period date a great
number of Tablets and of writings belonging to the most divers varieties and touching also upon as
varied subjects. The conditions of detention being progressively relaxed, Baha'u'llah could receive

an always more numerous crowd of visitors. The immense distance and the deserts which separated
Persian and 'Iraq from Palestine did not discourage the pilgrims who did not hesitate to undertake a
voyage of several months in order to encounter him whom they called “the Well-Beloved” or “the
Blessed Beauty”.

Baha’u’llah had become such a respected person that the question was asked whether he could
continue to be considered a prisoner. The mufti and the governor of the town who were among his
friends declared that nobody but he retained him as a prisoner for if he had decided to leave the
walls of his prison and to go outside of the town not one soul would have dared to stop him19.
Finally, in 1877 Baha’u’llah accepted to follow the injunctions of those who asked him to quit his
prison. In June of this year he settled in a country house some kilometers north of Acre. Two years
later because of the revolution which unseated Sultan 'Abdu'l-'Aziz, he settled in Bahji in a vast
property the owner of which had deserted because of the unhealthy water and a cholera epidemic.

It was there that he was to live out the last twelve years of his life, dividing his time between his
correspondence and the movement of pilgrims who came to hear his teaching for weeks at a time
before leaving again for 'Iraq, for Persia, for Turkestan or India, for during this time the diffusion of
his spiritual message had made considerable progress and Baha’i communities were in place in
Cairo, in Khartoum, Ishqabad, and Bombay. Baha’u’llah counted friends now as distinguished as
Professor Edward Granville Browne of Cambridge University20 and Comte Leo Tolstoi21.

Baha’u’llah having for more than forty years lived in conditions of exile and imprisonment, it is
essentially in writing that his teaching could be spread, he wrote much and it is said that his work, of
which a part was lost, could fill a hundred volumes. Baha’u’llah wrote but very few books in the
proper sense of the term. There are only four: the “Book of Certitude” (Kitab-i-Iqan); the “New
Book” (Kitab-i-Badi')22; the “Most Holy Book” (Kitab-i-Aqdas); and the “Epistle to the Son of the

Wolf” (Risaliy-i-Ibn-i-Dhib)23.

Bahá’u’lláh, “The Most Holy Book,” Haifa, 1992.
English: Shoghi Effendi, “God Passes By”, 1944; French: “Dieu passe pres de nous.”
E.G. Browne, “Five Years among the Persians,” and H. Balyuzi, “Edward Granville Browne and the
Bahá’í Faith,” Oxford.
Luigi Stendardo, “Tolstoi and the Bahá’í Faith,” Oxford, 1985.
“Kitab-i-Badi'“, Brno, 1992. There is no translation of this book into a Western language; it was recently
published in the Czech Republic from a facsimile of a manuscript dating from the epoch of Bahá’u’lláh.
English: “Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,” translated by S. Effendi Rabbani, n.d.; French: “L'Epitre au fils

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Most of his writings take the form of “Tablets” (alwah), that is to say of texts between one and several
tens of pages which for the most part take the form of letters, but which can also be poems, mystical
meditations, prayer or invocations, and admonishments addressed to celebrated persons. It is not
easy to penetrate such a diverse work. The letters which compose the greatest part are of unequal
interest inasmuch as, addressed to different recipients, they are obviously repetitive.

Baha’u’llah never wished to give a didactic form to his teaching. Beside the “Book of Certitude”, he
never composed the systematic exposition of any question. For him the essential was elsewhere.
What was important to him, was to transmit a spirit, to uplift the spirit, to open the hearts to
spiritual realities, to transform the beings. For this reason the language he employs is essentially
mystical. It is an art which uses all the resources of poetry and of psychology and which furthermore
often respects the complicated literary conventions in usage at this time.

3. The philosophy of Baha’u’llah

The brief account which we have just given of the life of Baha’u’llah has permitted us to touch upon
certain of the major philosophical themes of his work, and we hope that it will have convinced the
reader of the legitimacy of speaking of a veritable Baha’i philosophy. His Writings embrace the
greater part of the large philosophical questions: social and political

organization, ethics and morality, the status of woman, justice, political economy, education and pedagogy, science, epistemology and the theory of knowledge.

These themes suffice to characterize the modernity of the thought of Baha'u'llah. However, they do not form a philosophy in the sense to which we are accustomed. Classical philosophy has habituated us to consider metaphysics as the foundation of philosophy and for this reason metaphysics has been called "the first philosophy". During the 18th century the first transformation was produced when mathematics and the natural sciences acquired their autonomy. On the other hand, metaphysics no longer appeared to be the principal instrument of man in knowing and explaining the real, and from Locke onwards the reflective effort was progressively replaced by political philosophy and with Kant by the theory of knowledge.

At the end of the 19th century a similar revolution was produced and the central theme of philosophy was replaced by the individual and the exploration of his subjectivity. It is interesting to note that the philosophy of Baha'u'llah is altogether found in this evolution. Metaphysics has lost the central character it had in all the classical systems and, on the other hand, a development of political philosophy is found, but the political philosophy which is derived from a social dimension, is counterbalanced by a very modern concern with the individual accompanied by an unreserved accounting of his subjectivity. Furthermore, the approach towards the individual and his subjectivity is not carried out in the same manner as in Western philosophy. For Baha'u'llah, the comprehension of the individual and of his subjectivity necessitates going beyond the philosophical field in order to open oneness to the transcendental domain which bursts the boundaries of our purely rational understanding. Man is a mystery which reason cannot totally know and which language cannot render in an adequate manner. The knowledge of the individual and of his

du loup," trad. H. Dreyfus, Paris, 1913.

subjectivity belongs then to the spiritual domain the comprehension of which is one of the principal tasks of the philosophy of Baha'u'llah. While the classical metaphysics begin with God to descend thereafter through the degrees of the hierarchy of Being, from the world of essences to that of individuals, the question which is found at the heart of the philosophy of Baha'u'llah is an inquest upon the nature of man. It is because one begins by defining the nature of man that one can thereafter ascend the degrees of the hierarchy of Being. This explains that the philosophy of Ideas or of Forms appropriate to Platonism or Aristotelianism is replaced by a philosophy of values. It is in the function of the meaning which is given to human life that one can define the finality of the physical reality of the universe.

The question is no longer to explain how the universe exists, a task clearly assigned by Baha'u'llah to science, but why the universe exists. It is only from this that man can derive an idea of his Creator.
Nevertheless, Baha'u'llah recognizes that the process is much more complex, for if man does not know his Creator except in the measure in which he knows himself, he cannot know himself except in the measure in which he knows his Creator. Baha'u'llah writes:

"Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves."24

In another text, he declares:

"Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves—a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being."25

However, this true comprehension of human nature is not attainable by a purely philosophical process. For Baha'u'llah, man is not a given of nature. Man at the state of

nature is but an animal.
That which constitutes his essential reality is something that is found beyond the state of nature,
which is to begin with but a potentiality submitted to becoming. Humanity (Latin: humanitas, Arabic:
insaniyya) is not something that is, but something to be conquered, a spiritual perfection that is not
acquired except through a process of interior transformation, a horizon which is never totally
attained. Whatever may be the progress of civilization, whatever may be the progress of spirituality
and morality, humanity receives a perfectibility the potentialities of which can never be exhausted,
because they constitute what Baha'u'llah calls "the divine deposit". Through spiritual perfection, it is
God who actualizes Himself in man.

The principle which is the resume of the anthropology of Baha'u'llah, and which constitutes the key
to the vault of his teaching is contained in the affirmation that the nature of man is spiritual. The
fundamental philosophical problem which this principle poses consists then in understanding what
the word "spiritual" signifies. We can say that this question is the object of the metaphysic of

English: "Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", I, pp. 4-5;
French: I, p. 6.
English: Ibid., CLIII, pp. 326-327); French: CLIII, p. 304.

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Baha'u'llah, for the concept of the spiritual refers to a world of transcendental values, intermediary
values between God and His creation, the existence of which one must explain.

Now we understand why the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah is not presented according to the mode to
which the classical systems have habituated us. Being is no longer at the center of metaphysics; it is
replaced by the spirit and the consciousness.

4. From hermeneutics to ontology

Our study is divided in three parts: the first is named hermeneutics, the second theosophy and the
third metaphysics. In fact, this is not a strict division. Each one of these titles does not more than
indicate the dominant theme of the chapters which follow, but for the reasons which we have

delineated, these different aspects are inextricably mixed in the work of Baha'u'llah and they can never be totally separated. Our first part will show how Baha'u'llah transforms the metaphysical system of the "five presences" into a hermeneutic system.

But the hermeneutic of this system cannot be clearly perceived except in reference to a metaphysical system of which we will summarize some of the large features at the end of Chapter V. We could have, from there on, continued directly with the ontological and metaphysical questions which are at the center of our study, but that seemed impossible to us according to the measure that, as we have underlined it, metaphysics occupies a particularly atypical place in the philosophy of Baha'u'llah. It seemed important to us to begin by redefining this philosophy as a theosophy with all of these implications.

When we speak of "theosophy" with regard to the thought of Baha'u'llah, one must of course understand this word in a technical sense. Generally one calls "theosophy" a system of thought where are found three elements closely related: a hermeneutic, a gnosis and a philosophy of nature.
This bring us to define the word "gnosis". The "gnosis" which is considered here has nothing to do with the gnostic movements of the first centuries of our era. It consists of a knowledge which is acquired not by study, but by a process of transformation in the interior of man. While philosophy is the quest of an objective knowledge, theosophy accents the subjectivity and the personal and incommunicable character of all spiritual knowledge. Of course, gnosis must be accompanied by a noetic, that is, a theory of knowledge which defines not only the modalities of sensory knowledge and of its intelligibility, but also the conditions which permit man to acquire a supra-sensory knowledge of the spiritual worlds.

The noetic of Baha'u'llah is at the same time an epistemology and a gnosiology. Consequently, the noetic must be situated in the greater framework of an anthropology and in the more restrained framework of a psychology of which we will attempt to encompass the principal consequences. This

psychology will bring us to the metaphysical fundamentals of the teaching of Baha'u'llah, for one cannot treat of spiritual consciousness without speaking of the relationship of the soul and the body, and thus without questioning the ontological mode of the essential reality of the soul.

The third part entitled "metaphysic" is strictly devoted to the metaphysical problem of the divine worlds and of the entities which people them. We have wished to situate this metaphysical problem in a fairly large body which is the emanationist philosophy of Baha'u'llah, and we have tried to

define this as much in relationship to the Neoplatonism of Plotinus as to the Islamicized version of Greek philosophy (Falsafa) and particularly that of Aristotle. There is in effect a deeply rooted prejudice among the specialists in religious sciences who attribute to Baha'u'llah Neoplatonic ideas and who make of his metaphysic a derivative of that of al-Farabi, of Ibn Sina, of Suhrawardi, and of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i. We admit to have shared with prejudice for a very long time. However, one cannot seriously consider such an opinion without subjecting it first to philosophical and scientific criticism. That is what we have done, and the result was not conclusive.

Indeed, in order to characterize a philosophical system in relation to a school of thought, it is not sufficient to recognize one or two elements which seem to be vaguely alike; no more than one can base oneself upon certain similitudes in vocabulary. One must show that the economy of the system is organized according to the same model, or at least that the economies of the different systems being compared are compatible. There are indeed points of contact between the thought of Baha'u'llah and the Neoplatonic systems, but we hope that one of the principal results of our study will be to have demonstrated that in no case have these points of contact permitted that the teaching of Baha'u'llah be ranked in the posterity of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. One can even say that the teaching of Baha'u'llah presents itself as an implicit but nevertheless systematic refutation of Ibn Sina. For him, all of Hellenistic philosophy reposes upon a misunderstanding

which consists of
assimilating God with the necessary Being, as al-Kindi and al-Farabi did at the first.

For Baha'u'llah, God must exist distinct from Being. Furthermore, to pose a necessary Being results
in a philosophy of necessity which negates at once the liberty of man and the liberty of God.
Necessity (wajib) is not for him the concept antinomial of contingence (mumkinat). All the world of
Being, of which he proclaims the unicity26, belongs to contingency, for it is the property of Being to
be contingent. Only the sphere of Hahut, that is to say the divine essence, escapes contingency and
affirms itself as a transcendental absolute, source of all reality, but inaccessible to human knowledge.
We reach here the limits of Western vocabulary in order to translate the Arabic philosophical
vocabulary. In effect, we speak here of "the divine essence", which might imply that Baha'u'llah
situates divinity in a world of essences which would be the counterpart of a sensible world. But, that
which one calls "the divine essence" (dhat) as a matter of convenience has nothing to do with the
world of "essential realities" (haqa'iq). It is the world of
"In-Itself", an In-Itself beyond Being and
Existence, forever impenetrable to the human spirit; an In-Itself which appears furthermore to man
but in Himself, but by His manifestations. It is no doubt in order to escape the vocabulary of the
philosophy of essences that Baha'u'llah often utilizes the term of
"ipseity" or "identity" (huwiyya), or
that he speaks of the "nature" of God (kaynuna), rather than of His Being.

This brings us to a delicate point in our study which is that of ontology. We have subtitled our study
"Ontology of the divine worlds". We should have called it "Ontology and hermeneutic of the divine
worlds", for the question which one must pose is "What is a 'world'?" We will show that for
Baha'u'llah, the divine worlds do not constitute a cosmology, nor even a onto-cosmology such as the
onto-cosmology of Ibn Sina. The divine categories are in reality onto-hermeneutic categories. A
"world" is first a category of intelligibility. Every world represents a mode of Being: Being
characterizes itself by a number of infinite modalities, but these existential modalities are not entirely

separable from the operational modalities of the human spirit. It its essential and absolute reality the world of Being is one, but in its epistemological and phenomenological reality, as it presents itself to

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Makatib,” vol. I, p. 341.

the spirit of man, reality appears according to infinite modalities, which are conditioned by the ontological situs of man, the ontological place from which the landscape of Being is provisionally revealed to him. This is what makes Baha’u’llah say in “Seven Valleys” that the differences which the voyager perceives between the different worlds of God derive from the condition and the spiritual state of the seeker and not from the independent reality of these worlds.27

The divine worlds are thus structured by the human consciousness. It is in this way that the thought of Baha’u’llah rejoins the phenomenological preoccupations of our epoch and that his metaphysic implies a hermeneutic which permits one to question and to encompass the relationships of consciousness with the objective and subjective reality of the world.

For Baha’u’llah, there are two complementary ways of apprehending the world: the one rational and scientific which exists from our exteriority, and the other intuitive and mystical which exists from our interiority. But, in order to take this second path, man must first explore and understand his interiority. Furthermore, in that which concerns God and the spiritual worlds in general, the way of interiority alone exists. This is why Baha’u’llah, after the knowledge of self, assigns as finality to human existence “to know and love God”. He affirms that this is not only the finality of all human existence but that it is also the finality of all creation, for it is impossible to conceive of a divine creation without a consciousness which knows his Creator. This is what we have called “the anthropic principle” of Baha’u’llah.

This principle overturns all of philosophy and had multiple and fundamental implications which are far from being explored. It is this principle which explains that the reality of the universe appears to

be structured in its functioning by a law of intelligibility which the universe shares with the human spirit. It is this principle which also implicates the necessity of a noetic and epistemological link between the creature and the Creator which is at the source of the Baha'i hermeneutic. From that also follows that Being cannot be at the center of the metaphysic, and even of the ontology, of Baha'u'llah.

We have for a long time hesitated to know if we should include in our study one or several chapters on the ontology of Baha'u'llah or if we should content ourselves with considering the problem only with reference to the question of the divine worlds, and finally it is the second solution which we have retained. Some could be shocked that we approach a question which finally is revelatory of an entire metaphysical system without having first defined the concept from all philosophy since Plato and Aristotle. It is surely true that such a preliminary study would have permitted us to attain a higher level of precision in certain questions. But a certain number of scruples have stopped us.

The first is that Baha'u'llah does not explicitly define an ontology, even though in very numerous texts he seems to pose the limits of his general framework. Thus, it is not at all certain that the ontological givens of Baha'u'llah could receive a unique interpretation and, furthermore, and it seemed entirely possible to construct not one but various ontological systems within the general

English: Bahá'u'lláh, "The Seven Valleys," Wilmette, 1991, p. 18; French: "Les sept vallees," Bruxelles, 1970, p. 27: "...all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision." Bahá'u'lláh compares the seekers to a light which is white but in reflecting itself in different objects (the worlds) causes colors to appear which in their reality are not the true attributes of the objects but which are the properties of the light.

framework which he himself traced, and we think that this was so wished. To take to the fore the ontological problem would have brought us to a very speculative terrain which

is entirely outside of
the framework and the spirit of our study.

We have wished first of all to comment upon the texts of Baha'u'llah and to offer as faithful as
possible an interpretation of his thought. Of course, all interpretation implies hypotheses and
choices, but it did not seem to us that it would betray the spirit of our search to construct second
degree hypotheses which themselves rested upon the first degree hypotheses. Furthermore, to be
altogether honest, we must admit that certain of our choices and of our first degree hypotheses were
certainly influenced by our conception of the ontology of Baha'u'llah and we have thus forged a
certain number of principles the essentials of which we give here.

Being cannot be an explanation of the existence of beings (mawjud), because Being seems in Baha'i
philosophy to have nothing but a purely conceptual existence. Being is that which is in action in all
individuals, but Being is not dis-associable from individuals, as form is not dis-associable from
matter. Being is not thus be considered as the origin of things. The origin of things comes directly
from God, but his principle must be sought in the "First emanation" (al-sadir al-awwal) which is the
divine Verb (kalama).

And, the divine Verb is also the Spirit (ruh); from that follows that all that exists has a spirit and that
the Spirit must be regarded as the first principle of creation. It is the manner in which the Spirit
actualizes itself and diversifies itself in the things that determines the modalities of Being. The
material world is but a modality of Being among an infinite number of others which constitute what
are called "the spiritual worlds".

The spiritual worlds are peopled by entities which are essences which this very important reserve
that the essences are not reducible either to Being or to Existence, which is why, rather than of
essence, it is better to speak of "reality" or of "essential realities" (haqa'iq). Man cannot, at this stage
in his spiritual development, understand the true nature of essential realities. These essential realities
do not constitute spiritual substances for their mode of existence is totally impenetrable. From this

fact, the metaphysic of Baha’u’llah does not enter into the framework of a philosophy of essences.

These are some of the great lines of the ontology of Baha’u’llah such as we have tried to reconstitute.
These few principles are far from constituting a system and multiple questions remain open. We
think that it was the very wish of Baha’u’llah to leave them open and thus to permit schools to
flourish. According to the measure in which the concept of Being is no longer central to his
metaphysic, the reader will attest that it is altogether possible to treat the ontology of the divine
worlds, for here the word ontology reveals an altogether particular significance. It is no longer an
ontology of Being, but an ontology of Spirit.

The perspective which we have chosen for our study will not permit us to develop a general
interpretation of the metaphysic of Baha’u’llah. We have limited ourselves to four themes of unequal
importance. The first theme is an attempt at definition. It concerns what we have called “the
emanationist metaphysic of Baha’u’llah and its like with 'speculative theology'“, that is to say the
conception of a creation mirroring the Names and the Attributes of God. Our second theme will
turn around the study of the concept of “divine Manifestation” which appears to us to be the
fundamental element of all the philosophy of Baha’u’llah and the key of all the other metaphysical

developments.

It is the introduction of this concept of divine Manifestation which indicates that the teaching of
Baha’u’llah appears to be breaking with all the Islamic systems of thought. The world of the
manifestation is a central world around which are organized all the other ontological modalities.
This will bring us to question ourselves on the ontological spheres which separate man from this
world and more particularly to study the nature of the “essential realities” (haqa'iq) which populate
the spiritual worlds and the status of the Imaginal World which becomes thus an intermediary world
between the thought of man, his imaginal reason, and the realities as

intellectual as intelligible which
structure the real.

5. The hermeneutic question

We have until now much spoken of hermeneutic without having specifically specified the meaning
thereof. An effort of theorization is imposed here in order to define the Baha'i hermeneutic, for the
question presents itself like a game of mirrors: on the one hand we are convinced that the work of
Baha'u'llah is a hermeneutic, and on the other hand this work, in order to be understood, itself
requires a hermeneutical effort.

The usage of the term hermeneutic has become considerably diversified over the course of this last
century under the influence of the work of Husserl28, of Heidegger29, of Gadamer30 and Ricoeur31.
Here are constituted not one but several philosophies of hermeneutic in relation to which it is not
always easy to find oneself. These works are nevertheless of a great interest and they have
considerably aided us in comprehending the hermeneutic character of the work of Baha'u'llah.

We name "hermeneutic" the theory of interpretation or the theoretical reflection upon interpretive
action32. This term comes from the Greek hermeneuein which signifies "explain," "enunciate,"
"interpret" and "translate" or "serving as interpreter". In a general manner, hermeneutic
characterizes the discipline, the problems and the models which treat of the interpretation and the
criticism of texts. But hermeneutic has rapidly passed beyond simple criticism and exegetical
commentary in order to constitute a veritable theory of inspiration, whether profane or mystical33.

For the property of hermeneutic is first of all to be a science of the sacred, of which the laicization is

E. Husserl, "Idee directrice pour une phenomenologie," translated by P. Ricoeur, Paris, 1950. It is all the
work of Husserl which is indirectly an introduction to hermeneutics.
M. Heiddeger, "Etre et temps," translated by E. Martineau, Paris, 1985, and "Acheminement verse la
Parole," Paris, 1976.
H.G. Gadamer, "Verite et methode," trad. partielle de E. Sacre, Paris, 1959, and "L'Art de comprendre,"

Writing I: “Hermeneutique et tradition philosophique,” Paris, 1982; Writing II: “Hermeneutique et champ
de l'experience humaine,” Paris, 1991.
P. Ricoeur, “Le conflit des interpretations, Essai d'hermeneutique,” Paris, 1969; and “Du texte a l'action,
Essai d'hermeneutique II,” Paris, Seuil, 1986.
Jean Grondin, “L'universalite de l'hermeneutique,” Paris, 1993, p. 2.
Bernard Dupuy, article, “Hermeneutique,” in “Encyclopedia Universalis.”

nothing but progressive. Hermeneutic, since Antiquity has distinguished itself from simple literary
commentary by its religious source. Already in the “Politics” of Plato34, the function which is
assigned to hermeneutic is religious and sacred. This religious and sacred character has done
nothing else but reinforce itself since Christianity adopted the hermeneutic techniques for its own
exegesis. The determination of the rules of hermeneutic in the 3rd century entailed passionate
debates between the School of Alexandria and the School of Antioch. From this moment onwards
the life curve of sacred hermeneutic married that of Christianity. It knew a first apogee with the
Fathers of the Church and a second in the Middle Ages before beginning to decline. From the work
of certain pioneers in the 17th and 18th centuries (Dannhauer, Meier, Chladenius), the hermeneutic
question was to truly reappear in the philosophical field in the 19th century because of the work of
Schleiermacher. A new step was taken towards the universalization of hermeneutics with Dilthey
who sought in hermeneutic a methodology and an epistemology of the human sciences.

From this moment on, hermeneutic was to progressively invade all the field of philosophy. With the
development of linguistics and of the cognitive sciences, and especially with the inroads of
psychology and of all the techniques of exploration of the human psyche, the question of meaning
became a fundamental question. From here one passed from the hermeneutic of texts to the
hermeneutic of the sciences. Hermeneutic finished by appearing as the collection of the constitutive
rules of all human knowledge, and this is one of the meanings which we will retain. However,

hermeneutic is distinguished from epistemology. While this is interested in the heuristic mechanisms
and with the rules by which science tried to reproduce a faithful image of reality, hermeneutic is not
interested directly in this reality but in the process of human comprehension in the production of
meaning and in its transmission. All knowledge hence implies the putting to work of an
hermeneutic.

If now we confront what modern philosophy has taught us on the hermeneutic problem with the
texts of Baha'u'llah, there is no doubt that all the work of
Baha'u'llah constitutes a hermeneutic, but
not only in the sense of a sacred hermeneutic, but as a universal philosophical hermeneutic.

One can distinguish in Baha'u'llah three forms of hermeneutic: a sacred hermeneutic (ta'wil), a
psychological hermeneutic ('irfan), and a phenomenological or semiotic hermeneutic.

In the course of our study, rather than using the expression "sacred hermeneutic", taken from the
Latin "hermeneutica sacra", we have preferred the expression "spiritual hermeneutic" devised by
Henri Corbin to translate the Arabic "ta'wil". We consecrate Chapter VIII to a long development of
the usage of "ta'wil" as spiritual hermeneutic. "Ta'wil" is distinguished from the Christian
"hermeneutica sacra" by a much greater interpretive liberty. The word signifies "redirect to its
source", for spiritual hermeneutic is founded upon the idea that if the Qur'an descended upon the
earth through the arc of prophethood (nubuwa), a true comprehension requires that it be redirected
to its source by the arc of "ta'wil", that is to say, returned to its first inspiration in the heaven of
revelation.

This hermeneutical art consists in considering each Quranic term as the metaphorical expression of
a more profound spiritual truth. In this sense "ta'wil" is not without resonance with the typology
developed by Origen and the exegetical methods of certain Fathers of the Church. But while
French: Platon, "La Politique," 260 d 11.

Christianity was very conscious that anagogical interpretation could conduct to the dissolution of dogma and of orthodoxy, and felt very early the need to codify and to regulate the usage thereof, this effort of codification did not take place in Islam and engendered a profusion of hermeneutics and finally a dissolution of meaning. One part of our work will consist in seeing how Baha'u'llah reacts to this dissolution of meaning in delimiting the field of "ta'wil", while at the same time taking up himself a hermeneutic work the methods of which remain to be studied.

In taking up the spiritual hermeneutic of the Gospel and the Quran, Baha'u'llah suggests the hermeneutic of his own work. He furnishes us thus with a theory of prophetic inspiration.

The purpose of the prophetic discourse is not to announce a code of law, a morality and a philosophy, but to put man in touch with the world of transcendental values which constitute the laws of the spiritual world. The prophetic revelation aims then to communicate that which constitutes the most fundamental reality of the universe. In order to communicate this fundamental reality, language is insufficient. He cannot proceed except by "allusions" (ishara) and constitutes a "cryptic language" (ramz) which aims to communicate the "secrets" (asrar) which constitute the reality of things in the invisible world in which the spiritual laws are found written. In natural language, the allegorical symbol refers to a "crypte" which it is necessary to decode in order to arrive at the objective reality it symbolizes and which belongs to the world of experience. In the language of revelation, the reality aimed at does not belong to the world of objective experience, it is the aimed at reality which must be decrypted and not the symbol which is an intermediate scheme between the spiritual world and the world of experience from which has issued our symbolic universe.

This sacred hermeneutic brings us to the threshold of psychological hermeneutic from which it issues directly. The language of revelation, to reveal the world of values, must first put man in contact with his interiority. This language derives support from the great

myths of our unconscious,
and it is in this sense that sacred hermeneutic is linked to the mythical thought which derives its
source from the interiority of man. The revealed Word finds its origin in the world of transcendental
values which is one beyond the ineffable; it is for this reason that it has no other recourse but
symbolic language.

Psychological hermeneutic establishes this link between this symbolism and the interior world of
man. At the same time, it fixes the rules of this knowledge. The expression "psychological
hermeneutic" can translate the Arabic word "'irfan" which we have rendered in our study by "true
comprehension"; but it goes beyond this, for it unifies all the fields of empirical and spiritual
knowledge.

In this sense, the three types of knowledge of the gnoseology of Baha'u'llah which are the "true
knowing" (ma'rifat), the "true comprehension" ('irfan) and "wisdom" (hikmat) constitutes a
psychological hermeneutic which we have also called "gnosis", in a manner that certain ones will
judge perhaps as a bit adventurous, but which corresponds well to the technical definition of this
term; that is to say a knowledge which is not acquired except by the interior transformation of man.
There is moreover a particularly important point which justifies that the expression "psychological
hermeneutic" is better adapted than "gnosis", which is the personal and subjective character of the
mystical knowledge in Baha'u'llah. This "gnosis" does not aim like classical "gnosis" for an absolute,
eternal and immutable knowledge. On the contrary, the "gnosis" of Baha'u'llah is affirmed as a

relative and personal experience. The world of values cannot be perceived except according to the
function of the spiritual rank (maqam) of each individual.

In considering spiritual hermeneutic, we find a third hermeneutic which one could also very well call
semiotic, phenomenological or philosophical. All these forms of hermeneutic rest upon the idea that
creation is a sign (ayyat) of God. The universe appears to the mystic as a

universe of signs
hierarchically arranged in an ontological manner. All having issued from the Spirit, the Spirit speaks
in everything. The creation is thus a universe of signs in which every "world" carries the image or
the "trace" (athar) of the world which is immediately superior to it. The natural world speaks to us by
natural signs as the spiritual world speaks to us by spiritual signs. The material thus manifests the
spiritual. In the appearance of things is hidden an order which constitutes the invisible thread of
reality. But the experience of this invisible order is not possible except through a gnostic experience,
which unifies the different modes of the knowledge of man.

Finally, there exists a real unity of the Baha'i hermeneutic. It consists in putting into relationship the
signs which are in man, the signs which are in the sensible world, the signs which are in the spiritual
world and the signs which are in revelation. This is the problem which the ontology of the divine
worlds poses. Every "world" conveys to a universe of signs which constitute an onto-hermeneutic.

The Baha'i hermeneutic must reconcile two antinomian exigencies. On one hand, Baha'u'llah
explains that the universe is structured according to the same law of intelligibility as the human
spirit, on the other that the limited spiritual development of man in this world fixes a limit upon his
capacity to understand. The spiritual universe does not escape him totally, but the representation he
can make for himself cannot be other than metaphorical. This explains the relative character of all
metaphorical discourse. We will see in Chapter V that there exist in the Writings of Baha'u'llah an
abundance of different worlds, such as "the world of the visible and the invisible", "the world of
invention", "the world of decree", "the world of the commandment", etc.

These "worlds" do not correspond to realities independent from the human spirit. There is no
realistic implication of this description which does not but constitute a relative approach to reality.
We must there avoid a very serious misconception. This typology of worlds corresponds before all
else with a reality of the human spirit which because of its exigency of

intelligibility can consider that
this description gives him a provisionally satisfactory response to his questions. This typology of the
worlds is a hermeneutic and has nothing to do with any cosmology.

The three forms of hermeneutic which we have just described, spiritual, psychological and semiotic
or phenomenological, form a system in which each one among them is closely linked to the others in
a logical order. Beside these three fundamental forms of hermeneutic, there exists a fourth form
which we have called “axiological hermeneutic” and which corresponds to what the Baha’is call the
concept of “progressive revelation”, that is to say the progressive and relative, by the means of
Revelation, of the world of transcendental values which the Baha’is habitually call “divine laws” or
“spiritual laws”. This axiological hermeneutic forms the foundation of the philosophy of history of
Baha’u’llah which we will not treat. We will content ourselves with evoking this briefly in Chapter
XIV consecrated to the world of the Manifestation.

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

6. Problems and Methods

Our work has been a work of clearing. There was practically no previous study upon which we
could apply ourselves. We hope that it constitutes a step towards a complete analysis of the
metaphysic of Baha’u’llah. But in awaiting this, we are clearly conscious that this work of clearing is
composed of many approximations and interruptions. In the course of our research we have
discovered many new “tracks”. There could be no question of following all of them. We have said a
few words about ontology and hermeneutic, but all of Baha’i ontology and hermeneutic remains to
be elaborated.

We have wished to approach the work of Baha’u’llah as a philosopher. In this we had considered
that the texts had a double message. There is a message which resides in the first intentionality of the
text and which constitutes its principal meaning. But the principle meaning can hide many
secondary meanings. In other terms, there exists a whole collection of questions upon which the

texts of Baha'u'llah do not speak unless one questions them. The whole then is to ask good questions. Many are those among the Arab and Persian commentators of Baha'u'llah who could not do so because of their too great dependence upon Islamic culture from which he had arrived at extracting himself. One finds the same lack of detachment among the first Christian apologists of the 2nd century or even among certain Fathers of the Church who were too influenced by their Greek or Jewish culture to understand all the significance of the evangelical message. The first Baha'i commentators sought for a catalogue of principles. We have sought for ourselves a system, that is to say that we have wished to take the architectural measurement of the whole and to show how it functions as an organic totality while respecting a principle of auto-coherency.

In order to reconstitute this system, the comparative approach seemed to us to be the most simple and the most efficacious. In selecting a certain number of great philosophies such as those of Plato, of Aristotle, of Plotinus, of Saint Augustine, of Farabi, of Ibn Sina, etc., we have attempted to determine what replies Baha'u'llah brought to their great preoccupations. We have left the great fundamental questions of this type—"What is being?"—in order afterwards to treat subsidiary questions such as, for example, those which touch upon the debate between realism and nominalism. This method has had a double advantage: It immediately shows the originality of the thought of Baha'u'llah and it makes apparent the great lines of his system. It can have a double disadvantage: first that of concealing questions which can reveal totally original preoccupations and secondly to draw the philosophy of Baha'u'llah towards the habitual presentation of the classical philosophies.

The classical philosophies generally leave from ontology to construct their metaphysics, whereas the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah seems rather to be built from anthropology.

This step explains the very great use that we have made of certain Fathers of the Church such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Basil of Caesaria and Gregory of Nazianze,

because they seemed to
us to derive from an extremely neighborly problem. Besides that, the comparison with the system of
al-Kindi, Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn 'Arabi, Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra imposed itself. It is a work
which we have conducted with much attention to minutia but of which we can here only trace the
great lines. Certain readers will find perhaps stranger the references which we have made to certain
philosophers of the Middle Ages and notably to St. Thomas Aquinas, Dun Scot and William of
Ockham. The reason is that all three of them have reacted, as did
Baha'u'llah, to the philosophy of

Ibn Sina. Also, all have sought to grapple with the difficulties born of Platonism and of its adaptation
to the revealed religions. Finally, until William of Ockham, European philosophy and Muslim
philosophy spoke the same language; Islam having transmitted to the West the knowledge of the
great Greek authors most often by translations made in Latin from the Arabic. It seems to us that a
great project of the Baha'i philosophy of today must be to restore this ancient unity. This moment in
which we witness in Europe a renaissance of interest in metaphysical questions seems to us to be
particularly opportune. This does not signify a restoration of scholasticism which is dead for evident
reasons. But the ignorance of its medieval and patristic sources in which Western philosophy is
found confines it to amnesia.

Another of our preoccupations has been to treat the thought of Baha'u'llah as a living thought. In
order for it to remain alive, one must then continue to question it about the future. It is not sufficient
to know how Baha'u'llah is situated in relation to Ibn Sina. It is even more interesting to question it
in relation to a modern problem such as the cognitive sciences, epistemology, the great movements
of linguistics, of semiotics and of hermeneutics, of the phenomenology of Husserl, of existentialism
and of Heidegger's posterity, of logical empiricism and of neo-realism. Of course, it could not be a
question of arriving face to face with these problems. But this modern problem has not stopped

being present in our spirit, and the reader will occasionally find a trace, even as other preoccupations touching notably upon certain developments of modern physics.

In order to carry out this task well, it was not possible for us to rely upon the translations of the texts of Baha'u'llah which are found in print, because these translations, always of a very high quality when they were made by Shoghi Effendii, do not lend themselves to a critical study. It was necessary to return to the original text in Arabic and in Persian for these languages use an untranslatable philosophical terminology. In order to rise above these problems of interpretation, we have had to elaborate a certain number of rules.

The French translations, other than those of Dreyfus, being made based on those in English, we have always cited in their current French version. When differences or subtleties of translation existed between the English and the French we have made them apparent. When the deviation between the English translation and the original text was too great we have supplemented it with a second literal translation which is identified as such and printed between parentheses but without italicization. But most often, we have contented ourselves with inserting in the translation the Arabic or Persian term in furnishing an appropriate commentary. The reader who is little broken in to the habits of Orientalists should not let himself be effected by this jargon. He will perceive that in mastering at most a tenfold of technical Arabic terms he can understand the essentials of the metaphysics of Baha'u'llah. The technical terms in Arabic or Persian which are found between parentheses are not there for the simple concern for erudition. They underline that the French translation utilized poses a problem and refers to a specific concept the explanation of which has already been given.

When we have cited untranslated texts, we have furnished no translation, that would perhaps have given rise to polemic, but we have contented ourselves with a paraphrase which is made without inverted commas, but with references to the original text at the bottom of the page.

The usage which we have made of the texts being essentially philosophical, in our paraphrases and
our commentaries we have not hesitated to utilize philosophical terms to translate certain

expressions rendered in a literal fashion in the translations. For example, Shoghi Effendi translates
the word “wahm” by “imagination”, which is altogether literal. On certain occasions, it has seemed
preferable to us to speak of “subjectivity”, which is a term which refers to a precise philosophical
content. It is the same for “tajrid” sometimes rendered by “privation” and “tafrid” for
“individualization”. Also, the word “'aql” is habitually translated by “reason” and by “intellect”. We
have rendered it in certain occasions by “active imagination”, for it clearly corresponds to the
imaginative faculty in medieval philosophy which permits one to realize abstractions.

We have translated “ta'wil” by “spiritual hermeneutic” in order to follow the usage of the
Orientalists and everywhere that this was possible, we have re-established the vocabulary used in
France to facilitate a better comprehension for those who are habituated to this terminology. Of
course we consider all these translations as temporary and replying to momentary technical
exigencies. It would be dangerous to take them out of their context. In no case, are they destined to
be substituted to the more literal translations which have had the advantage of being heard by the
greatest number.

The transliteration retained is that in usage in the Baha’i translations which is not distinguished from
the habitual transliterations except that the form of the accents are those of Arabic, with Persian
having the same appearance but the system of vocalization of the Arabic alphabet. For reasons
having to do with the means of printing, we have omitted all the diacritical signs which the
specialists will have no trouble in reestablishing.

FIRST PART:
HERMENEUTICS

CHAPTER ONE:

1. The Kingdom as a structure of intelligibility

The question of the ontology of the divine worlds might appear to be a purely metaphysical question. We have chosen to treat the problem from the angle of hermeneutics because this approach is suggested to us by Baha'u'llah in a text of particular importance, the "Tablet of All Food". Undertaking the spiritual hermeneutic of the word "food" in the Qur'an, he assures us that this word has a significance of function in each of the worlds of God. We have therefore from one side a text that can be read in a purely hermeneutic manner, in its inventory of all the recorded meanings of the word "food", and from the other side we have a question which initially appears to be purely ontological which is that of the divine worlds.

However, this analysis is mistaken and it is the source of all the errors that have been made in the study of the metaphysics of Baha'u'llah. The ontology of Baha'u'llah is not, as in the classical

systems, the foundation of metaphysics.

The foundation of his metaphysics is instead in an anthropology and a new humanism that places the question of the nature of man at its very core. The role of ontology in the field of metaphysics is thus found to be displaced. Hence, Baha'i ontology splits into two branches. The first is an onto-hermeneutic which we find exemplified in the "Tablet of All Food" and which defines a "world" as a level of perception of the revelation dependent upon the spiritual "situs" of the seeker. The second is an onto-cosmology which defines a "world" as a mode of being which is itself a modality of the Spirit upon which depends a structure of intelligibility. It is this structure of intelligibility which establishes the unity of ontology and which assures communication between the onto-hermeneutic and the onto-cosmology.

Like every philosophical explanation, this one may appear to be complicated. The reading of the writings of Baha'u'llah permits one to generally ignore these problems

because instead of employing
philosophical language, Baha'u'llah utilizes a poetic language the
communicative power of which is
composed of images and upon the resonances which these images awaken at an
intuitive level in the
symbolic universe of our collective and personal unconscious.

This does not mean that the study of the onto-hermeneutic which we present here
should be
neglected. On the contrary, it opens the way to understanding the metaphysical
by rendering
explicit what is implicit, and furnishes us with a true key for reading the
writings of Baha'u'llah.
What may initially be taken for an innocent poetization, or the excesses of an
Oriental style which
would curtail verbiage in order to arrive at the heart of a subject, represents
in fact an indispensable
network of indications that situate the level of the reading of the text and
its philosophical meaning.

2. The Tablet of All Food

Baha'u'llah revealed the "Tablet of All Food" (Lawh-i-Kullu't-Ta'am)
shortly before his departure to
the mountains of Kurdistan, in April 1854, at a moment when he was experiencing
intense tests due
to the dissensions and disunity which then reigned in the surviving Babi
community. From the time
of his arrival in Baghdad, Baha'u'llah endeavored to gather around himself
the Babis, many of
whom were disoriented after the martyrdom of the Bab, and the great
persecutions that followed his
death. These persecutions had brought about the disappearance of the elite of
the Babi community,
beginning with the principal "Letters of the Living"35. Mirza Yahya, then
addressed as Jinab-i-Azal,
a half-brother of Baha'u'llah, had been designated the nominal leader of
the community but had
shown himself to be particularly incompetent and lacking in wisdom. His
relations with his older
brother had deteriorated. Baha'u'llah had occupied himself with some
success in reanimating the
spiritual life of his co-religionists, which threatened to become utterly
debased and extinguished. His
efficacious action and his wise counsels rapidly bore fruit. Numerous Babis
turned to him to receive
spiritual advice and direction. But this situation inspired the jealousy of
certain other Babis,

including Mirza Yahya. He had fallen under the influence of a deceitful and ambitious person,
named Siyyid Muhammad-i-Isfahani, who sowed the seeds of dissension in the community.

Shoghi Effendi writes:
That is to say the first eighteen disciples of the Báb.

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

“A clandestine opposition, whose aim was to nullify every effort exerted, and frustrate
every design conceived, by Baha’u’llah for the rehabilitation of a distracted community,
could now be clearly discerned. Insinuations, whose purpose was to sow the seeds of
doubt and suspicion and to represent Him as a usurper, as the subverter of the laws
instituted by the Bab, and the wrecker of His Cause, were being incessantly circulated.
His Epistles, interpretations, invocations and commentaries were being covertly and
indirectly criticized, challenged and misrepresented. An attempt to injure His person was
even set afoot but failed to materialize.”36

Baha’u’llah saw that the very efforts he was making to revive the Babi community were becoming
the cause of disunity. Faced with this situation, he soon decided to completely retire from the world,
to leave Baghdad in order to carry out the life of a wandering darvish in the mountains of
Kurdistan. The purpose of this retreat was to allow for the passions of his enemies to subside while
simultaneously delivering a salutary shock. At the time that Baha’u’llah wrote the “Tablet of All
Food”, he certainly already meditated this retreat for he declares:

“Give ear, O Kamal! to the voice of this lowly, this forsaken ant, that hath hid itself in its
hole, and whose desire is to depart from your midst, and vanish from your sight, by
reason of that which the hands of men have wrought.”37

This period was for Baha’u’llah one of intense moral and spiritual suffering, for nothing could afflict
him more than to see the disunity of the Babi community and the believers debasing themselves and
defiling their Faith by committing vile acts. The “Tablet of All Food” reflects this suffering which

returns as an echo in the text: “Oceans of sadness have surged over Me, a drop of which no soul could bear to drink”38, and “Such is my grief that My soul hath well nigh departed from My body”39, and finally:

“Woe is Me, woe is Me!...All that I have seen from the day on which I first drank the pure milk from the breast of My mother until this moment hath been effaced from My memory, in consequence of that which the hands of the people have committed.”40

The Tablet is addressed to a believer named Haji Mirza Kamalu'd-Din, originating from the little town of Naraq in Iran. Kamalu'd-Din had become a Babi some years earlier. After the death of the Bab he had remained firm in his faith notwithstanding the persecutions of the Babis and the dissensions he witnessed among the believers. The state in which the Babi movement found itself preoccupied him a great deal and this is without doubt one of the reasons that impelled him to go to Baghdad. His avowed aim was to encounter Mirza Yahya, then considered the nominal

Shoghi Effendi, “God Passes By,” 1944, p. 117; French: “Dieu passe pres de nous,” ed. fr. 1970, p. 147.
Translator’s Note: For biography of Shoghi Effendi included in the author’s footnote, see the endnote attached to the first reference to Shoghi Effendi in the book.
Ibid., p. 118.
Ibid., p. 148.
Ibid.
40Ibid.

representative of the Bab, intending to ask him for clarifications on a certain number of points of exegesis and mysticism. Having arrived in Baghdad, Kamalu'd-Din found it impossible to find a trace of Mirza Yahya who at this moment lived in hiding and refused to enter into contact with the believers. Kamalu'd-Din wrote then to Baha’u’llah and asked him to solicit from Mirza Yahya a commentary upon a verse of the Qur'an taken from the Sura of the Family of 'Imran which says:

“All food was lawful to the children of Israel except what Israel forbade to itself before the Torah was sent down.”41

According to tradition, this verse was revealed by the Prophet in order to reply to the attacks of the Jews of Medina who were astonished that the alimentary prohibitions of Islam were not the same as those of the Torah (Pentateuch), and especially, that they were less numerous, for the scrupulous observance of the Law was their pride.

Baha'u'llah transmitted Kamalu'd-Din's letter to Mirza Yahya who in his turn wrote a response that so superficial that his interlocutor lost all faith in his spiritual eminence. Kamalu'd-Din then turned to Baha'u'llah whose grandeur and knowledge he had begun to catch a glimpse of. It is under these circumstances that Baha'u'llah revealed for him the Tablet today known by the name of "Tablet of All Food"42.

The reading of this Tablet completely transformed Kamalu'd-Din. He was convinced that he who had written it could not be any other than "Him Whom God shall manifest"43. Baha'u'llah enjoined him to keep secret a mystery which it was premature to divulge and sent him to Iran, encouraging him to share this Tablet with the believers44.

The fundamental question taken up by the traditional exegesis of this Qur'anic verse is that of the divine laws of a social character (shari'a) and the divinely ordained capacity of the Prophets to modify these laws. Baha'u'llah took up this question again in the "Book of Certitude" (Kitab-i-Iqan) in a more profound and didactic manner. The explanation that he gives here is by nature much more mystical, as are most of his writings of this period.

3. The hierarchy of the spiritual worlds

The Tablet is written in Arabic and begins with a long prologue of great poetical character weaving

Qur'an III:92. The purpose of our study of Qur'anic verses being essentially linguistic, all the verses cited in this essay were retranslated through our efforts in order to come closest to the context so as not to find it necessary to utilize four or five different translations. Translator's Note: The original Arabic transliterated is as follows: kullu't-ta'aami kaana hillaa'l-libanii israa'iila illaa maaharrama israa'iylu 'alaa nafsih min qabli aan tunazzala't-tawratu. The second phrase of this verse, which is not discussed in

Bahá’u’lláh's commentary, is
transliterated as follows: qul fatuu biat-tawrati fatluuhaa in kuntum s.adiqiin
and has been rendered into
English by Mawlavi Sher Ali as: “Say: Bring then the Torah and read it, if
you are truthful.”
“Ma'idiy-i-Asmani,” volume IV, pp. 265-276. We will abridge the title
hereafter as “MA”.
“Him Whom God shall manifest” (Man Yuzhiruhu'llah) was the title by which
the Bab designated he whose
appearance he was charged with announcing.
Adib Taherzadeh, “The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh,” Oxford, 1974,
volume I, pp. 55-60.

a chain of metaphors upon light. An impression of grandeur and of majesty is
emitted by the whole
of this treatise and finishes up by captivating the reader. Baha’u’llah
puts in motion oceans of light
and of fire on which the waves break into one another before our eyes45. He
describes the
inundation of an enflamed gushing ocean from the “Temple of saintliness”, a
Temple which
constitutes in all likelihood to an allusion to his own person46. Then,
changing register, he
announces that the “Dove of light”, symbol as we know it of divine
inspiration, has newly begun
singing the eternal melodies, that a “Light” shines upon Mount Sinai, and
that the “Bird of light”
has come out from behind the veils which concealed it from the view of men47.

Baha’u’llah begins his commentary by explaining that the word “food”
has numerous meanings and
these meanings cannot be understood except through the hierarchy of spiritual
worlds which are
four in number. These four worlds are the worlds of Hahut, Lahut, Jabarut and
Malakut48.

4. The world of Hahut

The world of Hahut is that in which the unmanifested essence of God is totally
veiled. There does
not exist, upon that ontological level, any other being but God; His
singularity is total, and there
exists no creature to know Him. It is to this station of Hahut that apply the
words of the Prophets
such as: “In the beginning was God; there was no creature to know Him” and
“The Lord was alone;
with no one to adore Him”49. The world of Hahut is the world of the beginning

in a time outside of
time in the anteriority of causes. Baha'u'llah affirms elsewhere that God has always been a creator
and that there was always a creature to know Him. This is why he indicates that these words signify
"that the habitation wherein the Divine Being dwelleth is far above the reach and ken of any one
besides Him."50

Baha'u'llah describes this world as the world of "He is" (Huwa), and "the Paradise of the Absolute
unicity" (Ahadiyya).51 It is the "Absconditum" where no intelligence has ever penetrated. One refers to
this world as to that of the "Hidden Mystery" or as to the "Primal Point", for the primal point (al-
nuqta al-awwaliyya) is the first singularity from which all has proceeded, that which contains in itself all
the potentialities of existence. It is the One who contains only Himself and from whom furthermore
all the numbers have been engendered. God, in that world, is an unmanifested essence, for the
essence manifests itself by attributes, but these are not yet distinct from the essence. The ancient
philosophers made reference to this world as the world of the "One".

"MA," volume IV, pp. 265-266.
Ibid., p. 265.
Ibid., p. 266.
Ibid., p. 269.
English: "Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh," LXXVIII, p. 150; French: "Extrait des Ecrits de
Bahá'u'lláh," LXXVIII, p. 140. We will cite hereafter this book by the initials EEB followed by the number
of the extract with Roman numeral and the number of the page of the Belgian edition of 1949. Translator's
Note: Hereafter the English translation will be cited by the initials GL followed by the Roman numeral for
the extract and the number of the page from the U.S. edition of 1952.
Ibid., p. 151; Ibid., p. 140.
"MA" volume IV, p. 269.

This passage of the Tablet can be related to a Commentary (Tafsir) that 'Abdu'l-Bahaii wrote in
1861, seven years later, when he was only seventeen years old, upon the famous saying (hadith) of the
Prophet Muhammad "I was a hidden treasure, I desired to be known and for this purpose I brought

creation into being". The first part of this Commentary is consecrated to the station of the Hidden Treasure which Baha'u'llah in our text has clearly identified with the world of Hahut. 'Abdu'l-Baha explains that the station of the Hidden Treasure corresponds to the invisible level of the divine essence where it lives in its most absolute unicity. To speak of this station the philosophers and the theologians have used multiple terms and all are obscure each more than the other, such as "the hidden identity" (Ghayb al-huwiyya), "the pure Unicity" (Sarf al-ahadiyya), "the Occultation of occultations" (Ghayb al-ghuyyub), "the unknown Absolute", "the inaccessible to all qualification" (Mahjul al-na'at), or "the inaccessible to consciousness" (munqata al-wujdani) and others besides.52 The diversity of these expressions does no more than reveal the perplexity of man. The only thing which one can affirm with certitude is that the divine essence is inaccessible to the human intelligence and above all comparisons and all metaphors which are generally utilized to describe it. 'Abdu'l-Baha however takes on one of the images employed in this literature in giving it an original meaning. He writes that the only way to represent the divine essence consists in imagining a point and to consider how in the point are hidden all the letters and all the words (in the writing of Arabic the point is an essential element which gives value to the letter), without being able to find in the point any trace of their ipseity (huwiyyat), and without also being able to establish the least distinction among them.53

Hence, if one considers the divine essence on the ontological level, one attests that the names, the attributes and the essential potentialities (shu'unat-i-dhatiyyih)54 are in a state of non-existence, and it is for this very reason that one speaks of the essence as of a "Hidden Treasure" for even though nothing is manifest upon this ontological level, it is nevertheless from the non-manifestation of this essence that the existence of all things is derived. 'Abdu'l-Baha employs then another image that is also a common feature of this metaphysic of Being. He takes the image of the One (Ahad) which contains in itself all the numbers. Without the concept of the One the other numbers could not exist

(in modern language we would say that if there existed no secret quantity the measurement of
quantity would be impossible). Therefore, one can consider that it is the One which engenders all
the other numbers, and that all the numbers are contained in the One without, of course, finding in
the One the least trace of these numbers.55 Thus the character of absolute transcendence of the
divine essence is preserved. Baha'u'llah says, speaking of this stationiii:
"The door of the knowledge
of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men."56

Finally, the Hidden Treasure retains its mystery, for, contrary to what the greater part of the
thinkers and the philosophers have said before them, Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha do not identify
the Primal Point, or the One, with the divine essence. For them these are all at best images (tamthil),
or if one wishes, mental representations (tasawurat) destined to facilitate our comprehension. In one

"Makatib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá," volume II, p. 7. Abbreviated from henceforth as "Makatib".
Ibid., p. 8.
The expression "shu'unat-i-dhatiyyih" is an Arabic and Persian expression conveying the concept of "seminal
reasons" borrowed from Greek Stoicism.
"Makatib," volume II, p. 9.
English: GL, XXI, p. 49; French: EEB, XXI, p. 47.

of his Tablets in Persian Baha'u'llah affirms that it is false to speak of God as One for that introduces
already a sign of quantity, and God is above all number and all quantity. It is not thus a question of
affirming as did the Alexandrian philosopher Plotinus the fact that God is the One or that the One
is God, or like the Muslim Platonists as well as the Isma'ili philosophers such as Nasiri'd-Din Tusi,
Nasir-i-Khusraw or the School of the Brothers of Purity (Ithwan al-safa), who were to influence all the
subsequent philosophy in Persia, that God created the One as the first emanation of Himself, and
that the One was in his turn the agent of the creation of all things, or further that the One is the first
hypostasis which emanates from God and which engenders in its turn the hypostases of intelligence

('aql) and of the soul (nafs). All reference to the Point or to the One is but a convenience of language.

5. The world of Lahut

In the world of Lahut, the attributes of God begin their exteriorization. The potentialities contained in the divine essence manifest themselves, but only to the interior of His divinity. Upon this level of existence, the divine manifestations exist, but their existence is in total union with the essence of God. They have no individuality, no separate identity. They do not possess any other "me" but the divine "me"; this is why this world is called the kingdom of "He is He Who is and there is no other but Him" (Huwa huwa wa la ila huwa).57 This world is the world of the first divine emanation (tajalli, that is to say the Holy Spirit or the divine Verb). This Verb is the spiritual force which God uses to create the world. The philosophers have on their part referred to this spiritual force in calling it the Logos or the Nous.

In the many passages of the writings of Baha'u'llah that refer to the world of the divine Verb, he describes it as the invisible force that animates his manifestation and the inspiration that moves his pen. Sometimes he speaks of it as a totally divine world and exterior to himself where the essence of God manifests in him as "the Lord of Lords". Sometimes he describes it as manifesting through his own person and incarnating in him. This indicates two points of view, both of which are relative and neither of which is exclusive. In his writings Baha'u'llah frequently distinguishes these two ontological points of view. The Western reader would be mistaken in believing that they are pure artifices of poetry. When, for example, Baha'u'llah refers to himself as "the Tongue of Grandeur", or "the Most Exalted Pen", he does not utilize simple poetic metaphors. He wishes to precisely indicate that the voice which speaks through him is situated, at that moment, upon the level of the world of Lahut, as at other moments it situates itself upon the level of the world of Jabarut. Also these expressions are precious indications enabling the metaphysical and spiritual comprehension of these texts.

In the world of Lahut it is not possible to make a distinction between God and His Manifestation.
The Manifestation expresses Himself in the absolute nakedness of his own essence in union with the
divine essence; every other vestige of his personal identity has disappeared. When Baha'u'llah
manifests himself in this "station" (maqam), he is totally identified with the "Universal Manifestation"
(Mazhar-i-kulli). It is the "Universal Manifestation" who spoke to Moses in the Burning Bush. It is he
whom the Prophet Muhammad encountered during his ascension to heaven (mi'raj), taking the form
of the "Tree of the boundary" (Sidrat al-muntaha)58, the image that designates the point beyond which
"MA," volume IV, p. 269.
For example: English: "Persian Hidden Words," #77; GL, XLII, pp. 91-92; French: EEB, XLII, p. 85.

there is no passage for any human spirit. It is speaking of this ontological level of existence that Jesus
was able to say "I am the Alpha and the Omega", and Muhammad "I am the first and the last of
the messengers of God". For on this level of existence each divine messenger is the return of all those
who have preceded him and the incarnation of all those who will follow Him for they form but one
spirit in total union with the divine Being.

The world of Lahut contains in potentiality all the other levels of existence and all the creatures of
these worlds. It is the capacity of the Verb of God which permits this virtual creation to become a
creation in action. This is why Baha'u'llah refers to this level of existence as a world in which the two
letters K and N (which form in Arabic the word "Kun!" Be!] "were joined and knit together"59, for
according to the Qur'an60, it is by this word that God created the world.

Only the divine manifestation has access to the world of Lahut. It is from this world that upon him
descends the inspiration which has been symbolized by the flying dove above the Christ on the day
of his baptism, or by the archangel Gabriel who appeared to Muhammad. In the writings of
Baha'u'llah, the prophetic inspiration is sometimes symbolized by a dove or a nightingale,
sometimes by a virginal and angelic creature which is called "Huri". This

celestial “Huri” appeared it should be noted to Baha’u’llah in the Siyah-Chal at the moment in which he received the first intimation of his prophetic mission. However one must not believe that this heavenly “Huri” represents an actual vision. It is rather an image permitting the description in symbolic terms of the mystical experience of prophetic inspiration which results from total union with God.

6. The world of Jabarut

Below the world of “Lahut” is found the world of “Jabarut”. In the world of Jabarut there exists nothing but the divine will (Jabr). In this world one finds only God and His manifestations. It is the level of existence where they descend after having left the level of the fusional union of essences which is particular to Lahut in order to acquire an individual existence. Baha’u’llah describes this level of existence of the divine manifestations as “the station of pure abstraction and essential unity”61. In this world, the manifestations become the channels of the divine will. They are the archangels of which the Mosaic tradition speaks. To them is applied the formula “I am He, Himself, and He is I, myself.”62.

English: Long Obligatory Prayer, “Bahá’í Prayers,” USA, 1985, pp. 13; French: “Livre de Priere,” ed. 1973, p. 94. Cf. “Abwab al-Malakut,” ed. Beyrouth, p. 4. The Arabic text reads: Wa innahu huwa'l-sirru'l-maknunu wa'l-razmu'l-makhzunu aladhi bihi iqtarana'l-kafa bi-ruknihi'l-nun. This recalls the repeated phrase from the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis (Bereshit in Hebrew): “And God said” (ve yomer elohim), and among the first words of the opening chapter of the Gospel of John (1:1-3): “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 The same was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

Qur'an 36:82.

“Kitab-i-Iqan,” p. 152; English: GL, #XXII, pp. 50-51; French: EEB, XXII, p. 48. The English translation by Shoghi Effendi: “One is the station of pure abstraction and essential unity”. The French translation says somewhat vaguely “their abstract, pure condition, the condition of

incomparable unity."
62Translator's Note: "Kitab-i-Iqan," Part Two. The English translation by Shoghi Effendi: "They are the

Treasuries of divine knowledge, and the Repositories of celestial wisdom. Through them is transmitted a

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Baha'u'llah refers to this world by various expressions such as "the Kingdom of unity" (Wahidiyya), "the most exalted Paradise", "the Paradise of Justice", or "the world of divine decrees" for in this world there exists only the decree (qada) of God, and it is by this that the divine Manifestation speaks and acts. Through the Manifestation the divine decree rules over the world, for the word of God always prevails in the end. The divine decrees are the spiritual laws which will never be changed. They constitute the fundamental Order hidden behind the reality of all things, the source of all knowledge, human or divine. Whoever has arrived at comprehension of these laws has entered Paradise and has grasped the ultimate reality of Unity, for the true Unity is the unity of will between the creature and the Creator. Baha'u'llah also speaks of this world as the "World of Command"('alam al-amr)63, for it is by this command that all the creatures (khalq) have come into existence. The "World of Command" is distinguished from the "World of the creation", or "created world" ('alam al-khalq), by the fact that one is the world of divine justice, as we have seen, while the other is the world of mercy; for, without the divine mercy, the creatures, because of their imperfection, could not subsist.

Jabarut is also the world of the "Mother-Book" (umm al-kitab)iv and of the "preserved Tablet" (lawh al-muh.fuuzhin)v. In both cases, these are Qur'anic expressions which are found utilized with new meanings in the writings of Baha'u'llah. In order to understand the meaning of these expressions, one must remember that, for Muslims, the Qur'an is an uncreated book. In the eternity of God there exists a celestial prototype of the Book which is called the "Mother-Book" engraved upon a plaque made of an inalterable substance. The angel Gabriel did no more than dictate the book to

the Prophet Muhammad who transmitted it to human beings. The “preserved Tablet” also
represents in Muslim theology the plaque upon which the divine decrees are inscribed.

Baha’u’llah gives a different interpretation to these expressions. The “Mother-Book” and the
“preserved Tablet” represent the quintessence of revelation (wahy). This is the divine science which
the Manifestations share with God in the world of Jabarut. Hence, in Jabarut the revelation exists
independently of all human knowledge, it has no need of the garment of words and is not submitted
to the contingency which characterizes the created world. When the divine Manifestation transmits
the revelation to men, he gives it a contingent form which is that of human language, and it is for
this reason that one cannot totally identify revelation with the writings of the Manifestations, even as
Baha’u’llah clearly indicated in one of his Tablets, for revelation is transcendent and cannot be
captured in its plenitude by language.

The “Mother-Book” thus does not represent the prototype of any particular book, but the matrix
from which all the revealed books have issued forth, the science which God shares with His
Manifestations and which is unique to Them and common to all Dispensations.
The “preserved Tablet”, which Baha’u’llah sometimes calls the “Tablet of Chrysolite”vi, has an even
larger meaning. It is upon this Tablet that the divine decrees (qada) are inscribed and consequently
upon it is the science of the past and of the future. It is the symbol of the omniscience of the divine

grace that is infinite, and by them is revealed the light that can never fade. Even as He hath said: “There
is no distinction whatsoever between Thee and them; except that they are Thy servants, and are created
of Thee.” This is the significance of the tradition: “I am He, Himself, and He is I, myself.””
We will see in Chapter V that the expression can also be translated by “world of Revelation”. Certain
philosophers and Orientalists speak of 'alam-i-amr as the “world of the imperative”.

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Manifestations as of the omnipotence of God. Indeed, the omniscience of the

Manifestations derives
from this omnipotence, and omniscience and omnipotence should be considered as two aspects of
the same reality which is the reality of Jabarut. The “divine Pen”
(qalam-i-ilahi) becomes then the
expression of this omnipotence for this pen registers the divine decrees; at the same time it is the sign
of omniscience for it is the channel of revelation.

7. The world of Malakut

The world of “Malakut”, which is found below Jabarut, is the angelic kingdom of those souls to whom
God has revealed Himself in the splendour of His “greatest manifestation”
(al-mazhar al-akbar)64. In
the “Tablet to Varqa” Baha’u’llah has given us a striking description of this world. He explains that
the term Malakut covers two significances. The first concerns the Manifestation and the second “the
world of images” ('alam al-mithal) which is an intermediary world between Jabarut and the human
world of mortality(Nasut), between the “heavens” and the “earth”.

Malakut is actually a dimension of the contingent universe ('alam al-mumkinat). It is in Malakut that the
soul resides, for the soul is an essence (jawhar) and can never leave the world of essences. The soul
cannot incarnate itself in matter; it can only reflect itself in matter even as light reflects in a mirror. It
is the soul that communicates with the divine worlds, and consequently everything that comes from
those worlds must pass through Malakut to reach man. This explains the intermediary character of
the world of Malakut. For example, Baha’u’llah explains that when the Verb of God descends from
the world of Lahut towards man, it passes into the world of Jabarut where it is made manifest, this
constituting the first step of “substantification” (taqyid)65. When the Verb descends to the level of
Malakut, it confers to those who dwell therein the blessings of the power coming from the superior
levels.

From many points of view, Malakut as a “world of images” has resemblances to the platonic world of
ideas. Baha’u’llah tells us that the world of man (Nasut) is but a metaphorical image of Malakut.
Malakut is the destiny, the finality of man. It is the spiritual world par excellence, “the Kingdom of

Abha", the world of souls, where, beyond physical death, man pursues his spiritual development in
his infinite voyage towards God.

Baha'u'llah tells us that the world of Malakut is itself hierarchized according to the degree of spiritual
development of the souls therein. At the summit of Malakut is found "the celestial Arc", "the
Crimson Ark" upon which navigate the souls of the Prophets, the martyrs and the saints who form
"the Supreme Concourse" (Mala-i-A'la)66, "the angelic troops", "the Celestial Assembly", ready at
every moment to come to the rescue of those who arise to uphold the Cause of God.

8. The metaphorical character of Malakut

"MA," volume I, p. 19; volume IV, p. 226 ("Tablet of the Examination," Lawh-i-Istintaq).
Ibid., volume I, p. 18.
For example: English: PHW: #77; GL, XLII, p. 91; French: XLII, p. 85.

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When man pursues his spiritual development in the world of Nasut, he does so by means of actions
such helping and serving his fellow human beings, sacrificing his comfort in order to accomplish
noble and altruistic tasks, contributing from his means to the support of religion, augmenting his
love for others through philanthropic acts, developing his spiritual comprehension by associating
with pure and detached persons, daily recitation and reading of the revealed Word, and promoting
and promulgating the teachings of his Faith. These actions, Baha'u'llah tells us, contribute to the
spiritual development of man because they are the symbolic representations, one could say the
"images", of the functions of the soul in Malakut.

Our life in this world, the world of Nasut is then a metaphorical image of what our life will be in the
other world, the world of Malakut. In this world man exercises and develops his spiritual functions
which will become his "senses" in the other world, permitting him to live a new existence
conforming to the spiritual nature of the unembodied soul. If the soul fails to develop its spiritual
qualities in this world, it will not grow and it will enter the Kingdom in a state of spiritual atrophy

that will render its existence in Malakut similar to that of the blind and the deaf upon this earth. As for those who will have developed their spiritual qualities, these will become new senses for them by which they will breathe “the celestial breezes”, will hear the “divine melodies”, and will contemplate meta-physical landscapes that will cheer them in their deepest selves. The quality of the world of man (Nasut) as a metaphorical reflection or image of Malakut is illustrated by an anecdote which ‘Abdu’l-Baha transmits in his book “Memorials of the Faithful” (Tadhkiratu'l-Wafa). In this book, he tells us of the life and death of seventy-four of the close companions of Baha’u’llah. In the chapter consecrated to Mulla 'Ali-Akbar, who was named by Baha’u’llah a “Hand of the Cause of God”, and who played a very significant role in the propagation of the Baha’i teachings during his early sojourn, ‘Abdu’l-Baha describes a dream that he had some years after the death of this individual:

“One night, not long ago, I saw him in the world of dreams. Although his frame had always been massive, in the dream world he appeared larger and more corpulent than ever. It seemed as if he had returned from a journey. I said to him, 'Jinab, you have grown good and stout.' 'Yes,' he answered, 'praise be to God! I have been in places where the air was fresh and sweet, and the water crystal pure; the landscapes were beautiful to look upon, the foods delectable. It all agreed with me, of course, so I am stronger than ever now, and I have recovered the zest of my early youth. The breaths of the All-Merciful blew over me and all my time was spent in telling of God. I have been setting forth His proofs, and teaching His Faith.'“67

‘Abdu’l-Baha added this particularly significant commentary:

“The meaning of teaching the Faith in the next world is spreading the sweet savors of holiness; that action is the same as teaching.”68

This short text teaches us two things. The first is that the most important actions of our terrestrial life such as loving one's fellows, propagating the divine teachings, giving and receiving unselfishly, all

have a counterpart in Malakut and should be regarded as the symbolic expressions of the life of the

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Memorials of the Faithful,” translated by Marzieh Gail, USA, 1971, pp. 9-12.
Ibid., p. 12.

soul in the divine Kingdom. The second is that as long as man inhabits this mortal realm, he can neither comprehend nor directly express the realities of the spiritual world. As long as he is the prisoner of this world his intelligence cannot comprehend these realities, and no human language can describe them. All he can do, at the very best is to have a vague intuition of their reality. Poetic language is the only way to mediate this communicational impossibility, and recourse to metaphors based upon this sensible world is therefore inevitable.

However, these metaphors are not simple poetic artifices. They contain a portion of the spiritual truth that goes beyond the limitation of words. Thus, in the story of ‘Abdu’l-Baha we must understand that the pleasures of our physical senses, such as in smelling a perfume, contemplating a landscape, savoring a delicious platter, are the terrestrial images of the life of the soul in Malakut. To go beyond that in the comprehension of this mystery seems to be impossible. Nevertheless, for those who possess spiritual comprehension, meditation upon this world permits some degree of intuitive understanding of the spiritual world.

9. The unity of the divine worlds

The relations which exist between this world, the world of Nasut, and the spiritual worlds is a very rich theme. All the great mystics have intuited this connection, and, for example, in the writings attributed to Hermes we read: “The world below is the image of the world above”. Baha’u’llah explains to us that the world below (Nasut) and Malakut are not two worlds totally separated from one another but are rather two parts of one greater world, which he calls “the world of creation” ('alam-i-khalq) or “the contingent world” ('alam-i-mumkinat), and both are governed by the same laws. In a Tablet addressed to a believer named Yusuf-i-Isfahani69, Baha’u’llah

explains that all the divine
worlds revolve around this world. He says that for this reason, the soul who in this world has always
behaved himself according to the Will of God and according to His commands, after his departure
for the other world, will show qualities which were before but potentialities. He adds that in each
world there exists for every soul a state which was previously assigned to him. ‘Abdu’l-Baha writes in
one of his Tablets:

“Those souls who are pure and unsullied, upon the dissolution of their elemental frames,
hasten away to the world of God, and that world is within this world. The people of this
world, however, are unaware of that world, and are even as the mineral and the vegetable
that know nothing of the world of the animal and the world of man.”70

It is this differentiation and interdependence between the two worlds that explains that the spiritual
laws governing the whole of creation take different forms adapted to the requirements of each. The
similitude between “the world above” and “the world below” had been understood since the most
remote antiquity. But each religion, each tradition, has developed its predilected themes. The Baha’i
Writings suggest that meditating upon the physical realities of this world can be a means of
comprehending the spiritual realities of the other world, on condition that in doing so we do not lose
“MA,” volume IV, pp. 19-20.
‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Muntakhabaaty az makaatiib min
had.rat-i-’Abdu’l-Bahá“, USA, 1979, #150, p. 280;
English: “Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” [SWAB] Haifa, 1978, #163, pp. 194-195; French:
“Selections des Ecrits d’Abdu’l-Bahá,” [SEAB] trad. fr. Pierre Coulon, Bruxelles, 1983, p. 193.

sight of what has been outwardly conveyed to us through divine Revelation, and that we allow
ourselves to be guided by this divine Revelation. If the world of creation reflects spiritual laws, it is
not only because of the unity of the physical world and the spiritual world, for inasmuch as these
worlds are a divine emanation, the least atom of the physical world reflects the divine attributes

according to its capacity. In “Words of Paradise” (Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyyih) Baha’u’llah writes:

“Every created being however revealeth His signs which are but emanations from Him
and not His Own Self. All these signs are reflected and can be seen in the book of
existence, and the scrolls that depict the shape and pattern of the universe are indeed a
most great book.”71

The spiritual worlds being exalted above language, only metaphor can permit us to approach them.
When one reads Baha’i literature, one notices thus that there are a number of recurrent themes.

One of these themes is the similitude that we find between the embryo in the womb of his mother
and the terrestrial life. When he is in the womb of his mother, the embryo could believe that this is
the only world that exists. He has no consciousness of the world that exists outside of the uterine
membrane. He is not even conscious of his mother. In the physical world, we are in the same
situation as the embryo in the uterine world. We are inclined to rely exclusively on our senses and to
believe that this world is the only world that exists, even though the distance that separates this
world from the spiritual worlds is even thinner than the uterine membrane. Furthermore, the
situation of this world in relationship to the spiritual world, is the same as the situation of the uterine
world in relation to the physical world. The physical world surrounds on all sides the matrix in
which the embryo lives; and in reality, the matrix and the embryo are both part, without being
aware of this, of the physical world. So also, the spiritual world surrounds the physical world as the
physical world surrounds the matrix, and there exists between them the same relationship. It is for
this reason that the physical world and the spiritual world form but one actual world. While the
matrix is narrow and confined, in comparison the extent of the physical world can appear to be
infinite. The relation is the same with the spiritual world; in comparison with the spiritual world this
world is as narrow and confined as the uterine world, while the spiritual world seems to be infinite.

We can also attest that the uterine world is governed by the same laws as the physical world, even if these laws do not manifest themselves in the same fashion in these two worlds. So also, the physical world is governed by the same laws as the spiritual world, for the physical world is but the very least part of a much more vast system which is the “World of Creation” and which includes the spiritual world. The physical world is as much integrated into the spiritual world as the uterine world is into the physical world.

The relationships which we may posit between the uterine world and the physical world do not stop here, but also relate to the development of the soul which we can compare to the development of the embryo. In the uterine world, the embryo is born of the fertilization of an ovule. From this moment

“Majmu'iy-i-Ishraqat,” p. 116; English: “Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh,” p. 60. The Persian text does not speak of “emanation” but of manifestation: “dar kull ayyat-i u zahir” which is to say “in all things His attributes manifest themselves”. Also, the English “the shape and pattern” which refers to the world translates a single Persian word which is “naqsh” which means “plan, structure,” and can be effectively rendered by the English “pattern” even though it has a richer and more extended meaning.

on, the primordial cell begins to multiply and to diversify, and in this way the embryo takes form.
From the moment of fertilization we can be sure that the gestation will not exceed nine months. At the end of these nine months, the embryo will have attained perfection; that is to say that it will have expended all of its possibilities of development in the uterine world. Its development could no longer be pursued in that world, and requires that it be transferred to another world in which it can begin a new cycle of growth. In this fashion, birth results in detachment from one world and passage from this world into another. In the same fashion, the process of human development in this world has a predetermined duration that is terminated by physical death. If man remained eternally in this world he would make only very limited spiritual progress and early on he would exhaust all the

potentialities of his development.

Sometimes the infant is born before term. The infant then passes through a critical phase in which he is fragile and must receive careful attention. Nevertheless, having passed through this critical phase, the infant continues his development in a normal way. This is what happens to the souls of men who are prematurely deceased. Some leave this world early because they have evolved more rapidly than others and have arrived more rapidly at the requisite level of spiritual maturityvii. Others leave this world prematurely. While they have not attained the optimum temporal threshold of spiritual development, nevertheless, the world rather than being a means and an instrument for this development, has instead become an obstacle72.

In the womb of his mother, the embryo lives and develops. He grows in dimensions and in proportion and according to the degree of his growth, the cells diversify and new organs appear. Some biologists think that the embryo passes through all the steps of morphogenesis, that is to say that it recapitulates the entire evolution of life upon the earth. However that may be, the organs which the embryo develops in the uterine world are of no utility to him there. He has no need of eyes to see, nor of ears to hear, nor of legs to walk. All his organs will be without use to him until after his birth into this world. So also, in the course of this terrestrial life, we must develop our spiritual qualities. The physical world being already a more evolved world than the uterine world, these qualities can make a fitting start. There are those who believe that one can live very well in this world without bothering with our spiritual development. But the Baha'i writings explain that in the other world these spiritual qualities will become like the eyes and the ears of this world. Those who will have failed to develop their spiritual qualities will be, in the spiritual world, like the blind, the deaf and the dumb of this world.

'Abdu'l-Baha developed this theme in many of his Tablets and talks73. In one of his Tablets in Persian74 he explains that as long as the embryo is in the womb of his mother his physical defects

and imperfections are hidden, for these do not become manifest until after birth. So also, to a large
degree, our spiritual defects and imperfections are not apparent in this world, but when we enter the
other world then they in their turn become evident and manifest75.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Some Answered Questions,” LXVI, pp. 238-240 passim.; French: “Les Lecons de Saint
Jean d'Acre,” 5eme ed. corrigee, Paris 1982, LXVI, pp. 244-245 passim.
For example: English: SWAB, #156, pp. 183-185; French: SEAB, # 156, p. 184.
“Makatib,” volume I, pp. 337-342.
Ibid., p. 339.

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The infant in the uterine world can not imagine what seeing, smelling or speaking signifies, for these
are functions that belong to the physical world. So also, as long as we are in this world, we can not
imagine what the awakening of our spiritual senses will represent in the other world76.

If we reflect further upon this metaphor we may more deeply penetrate its meaning. If an infant is
born without the capacity to see, smell, speak or walk we say that this infant is handicapped. But,
what is a handicap if it is not the impossibility of enjoying certain characteristics of the physical
world from which man derives a particular pleasure? That which makes us love life is the beauty of
the world which surrounds us and the pleasures which our senses make us capable of deriving
therefrom. The life of a man who is incapable of communicating through his senses with the world
surrounding him is akin to a vegetative existence. Many would feel that such an existence would not
be worth the effort of being lived. It would render the existence of man to the level of the protozoa,
for if an infant were to appear in this world without senses, his very intelligence could not awaken.

A failure to develop our spiritual qualities will result in us entering the other world with spiritual
handicaps similar to the status of the physically handicapped in this world. Our spiritual qualities
become our spiritual senses and if these senses do not function, we will be deprived of the enjoyment
of certain aspects of the spiritual world. In the other world there are spiritual senses which

correspond to each of the physical senses such as vision, hearing, or taste in this world. To fail in our development of these spiritual senses will deprive us of the full enjoyment of the other world.

It is for this reason that in the same Tablet cited above, ‘Abdu’l-Baha declares that human life can be compared to a tree and that the metaphorical heaven and the hell of the tree are contained in the fruit77. The tree is responsible for the fruit it produces. Paradise and hell are in us. They are spiritual states.

‘Abdu’l-Baha adds that those men who negate the existence of the spiritual worlds are in the same position as the mineral which negates the existence of the vegetable world, or the vegetable which negates the existence of the animal world. In the case of the mineral, vegetable and animal worlds, their internal organization provides no information about these higher worlds78. Likewise, for the heedless, for those whose spiritual senses have not begun to awaken, the internal organization of their human nature does not disclose the existence of higher spiritual worlds. In reality, the world of existence, physical and spiritual, is one world79.

Another theme which one encounters in the Baha’i writings is the similarity between the laws which govern the growth of a tree and those which govern the spiritual development of man80. The image of the tree shows us the interdependency which exists between the different divine worlds. The tree belongs to the vegetable world, while it derives all of its substance from the mineral world, that is to say from an inferior world. In similar fashion, God did not wish for man to be a pure spirit, for otherwise He would have created him spiritually perfect, and not assigned him this mortal sojourn

Ibid.
Ibid., p. 338.
Ibid., pp. 340-341.
Ibid., p. 341. The Persian text says: 'alam-i-vujud 'alam-i-vahid ast.
Adib Taherzadeh, “The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh,” Oxford, 1992, p. 8.

in which to begin his process of spiritual development. The material world is the world in which

man roots his future growth, even as the tree plunges his roots into the earth. Man has need of the material world to nourish his growth; without it he could not make a beginning. Even as the vegetable world is built upon the mineral world and the animal world upon the vegetable world, so also the spiritual world is built upon the human world ('alam-i-insani). Each of the superior worlds encompasses the inferior worlds and all are interdependent as we see in the different kingdoms of nature.

While the nature of the tree is to plunge its roots in the soil to take from the earth its substance, if a tree chose to bury its branches in the soil, it would condemn itself to wither away and to rot. Its very nature pushes it to lift up its branches towards the sky in the opposite direction to the earth. For man, the equivalent of this upreaching of branches, is the law of detachment. Even though the material world is there to take care of the needs of his spiritual development, nevertheless, he can not arrive at this development without detaching himself from the things of this world. It is because of this that without detachment there is no spiritual development possible. The essential nature of man is spiritual, and it attracts him to the spiritual world even as the branches of the tree are attracted to the sky.

If the tree directs its branches to the sky, it is because it is attracted by the light of the sun. So also man is attracted by the “Sun” of the divine Manifestation and it is this spiritual light which conditions his spiritual development. The light of the sun permits the tree to produce leaves, then flowers and fruits. So also the light of the “Sun” of the Manifestation permits man to develop his spiritual qualities and produce good actions. If we then consider a forest, we will find trees of varied heights. Some are immense and tower to the summit of the forest. These trees are in direct contact with the rays of the sun. Then there are trees that live in their shadow. In the final analysis however, all the trees derive their life through the light of the sun, even those that do not directly receive this light. There even exist parasitic plants like the tropical creepers, ivy or mistletoe, which

notwithstanding their own feebleness make use of other trees to attain this light. Human life is composed in a similar fashion. There are men who live directly in the light of the Manifestation and those who never see that light. But in the two cases it is always the light of the Manifestation that is the cause of their existence and of their spiritual development. This is why the path of spiritual development is never totally closed, even to those who do not recognize God and His Manifestation.

Another of the ways in which the unity of the created world is effected, besides the interdependency of the worlds which has already been noted, is that they exist only by the breath of the Holy Spirit transmitted through the divine Manifestation. Nothing would exist without this light which is the cause of the existence of all things.

One could elaborate infinitely upon this theme of the similarities between the laws of the physical world and those of the spiritual world. There are many examples of this theme found in the writings of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha. But what is important is that we understand the profound reasons for this similarity. Our aim is not to diversify the examples of this theme, but to facilitate comprehension of the fundamental unity of the universe and of its laws. Does not 'Abdu'l-Baha say that universal gravity is an example of the Law of Love which is the fundamental Law governing all of creation and indeed all the divine worlds?

These few reflections permit us to see that the metaphorical character of the physical world in

relation to the spiritual world is not like a simple play of mirrors, as if the physical world were similar to the image of the sky reflected in the water of a lake. This metaphorical relation is the expression of something much more profound which derives from the unity of the creation of God; unity which encompasses as much the physical world as the spiritual, the sensible as the intelligible.

10. The infinite continnum of the divine worlds

All that we have said about the different divine worlds obviously implies that

when Baha'u'llah refers to these worlds, his explanation is necessarily limited by human language and by our comprehension. It is but a faint glimmer and without doubt very distant from reality. The divine worlds form an infinite continuum. Every attempt to establish distinctions between them is but a creation of the human spirit based upon arbitrary criteria, as are arbitrary for example the criteria which permit us to distinguish the colors of the chromatic spectrum, for, as everyone knows, one passes from one color to another in an imperceptible manner.

Nevertheless, the definitions which Baha'u'llah gives of the divine worlds furnish a precious key for the comprehension of his writings. It often happens that when reading his writings one may ask who is speaking. In the same text Baha'u'llah often utilizes several levels of language. Sometimes he speaks as a mere man, at others as Divinity personified. Sometimes he introduces distinct entities such as the nightingale, the dove, the celestial pen, and so forth. At others, his writings represent a dialogue between various voices, as in the "Tablet of Fire". These different levels of language represent the different aspects of the divine Manifestation as viewed from the perspective of worlds of Lahut, Jabarut, Malakut and Nasut.

This hierarchy of spiritual worlds does not derive its meaning from a creationist theology, or in relation to human existence, as in Muslim philosophy or among certain Christian authors such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite81. Baha'u'llah's intention is to explain the relationship of God with His Manifestation, and consequently between His Manifestation and man. In order to understand that idea one must abandon the old modes of thought, whether of Muslim philosophy or of Christian scholasticism, and not permit oneself to be seduced by the Neoplatonic charms of these spiritual worlds. If Baha'u'llah utilizes a Neoplatonic vocabulary it is because it is the vocabulary which was in usage among the Muslim thinkers of his time, and perhaps also because all every spiritual philosophy based upon a revealed message has necessarily a Neoplatonic look. We will return to these problems in the third part of this book.

11. The Tablet of Haqqu'n-Nas

Baha’u’llah consecrated an entire Tablet82, which is sometimes called “Lawh-i-Haqqu'n-Nas”, to explain the metaphorical character of this world. Unfortunately we do not know the circumstances of the revelation of this Tablet. It was written in response to a correspondent whom Baha’u’llah calls “friend of my heart”, and who in all likelihood asked him a whole series of questions. The principal question that is taken up in this Tablet is a particularly obscure point of Muslim theology: How is it

For example Rene Roque, “L'Univers Dionysien, Structure et hierarchie des mondes selon le Pseudo-Denys,” Paris, 1983.

“MA,” volume VII, pp. 199-125.

possible, as tradition [hadith] teaches, that we can acquit ourselves of our debts in the next world after we die? This is the principle which Muslim theology calls “haqqu'n-nas”, literally the “right of people”. It affirms that in the other world there is compensation for whatever is owed to us, including everything stolen or usurped. In the context of the Baha’i teachings, this question has no meaning, and this is what Baha’u’llah endeavored to have his interrogator comprehend.

The question nevertheless reflects the Persian mentality of the time. The Shi'i theologians and jurists were partial to this kind of problem, engaging in long contradictory debates which in turn gave rise to multiple interpretations in which are systematically envisioned all of the germane cases even the most absurd. Baha’u’llah himself cites a particularly absurd example83 of such cases of casuistics which recalls the question posed to Jesus by the Sadduccees, regarding the status, on the day of resurrection, of a widow who would have successively married the six brothers of her first husband.

The problem is posed in the following terms: Let us imagine a Christian who lends another Christian a jar of wine and a piece of pork meat—two things which are permitted to Christians but forbidden to Muslims. After a certain time the debtor and the lender both become Muslims. How

can the debtor acquit himself of his debt, for not only can Muslims not consume either wine or pork
meat, but they are forbidden to engage in the commerce of either, and it is thus impossible to pay
back the lender with money. If the debt cannot be repaid in this world, how will it be in the other
world for the debtor? Persian society of the 19th century was passionately fond of this kind of
problem84.

Jesus gave the following response to the Sadducees:

“Those who belong to this world take wife and husband. But those who have been judged
worthy of having part in the world to come and in the resurrection of the dead take
neither wife nor husband. It is that they cannot die, for they are the same as angels...”85

Baha’u’llah responds in a similar vein. Baha’u’llah begins by indicating that in order to comprehend
this problem, one must have a detached heart and an intelligence purified from communal
superstitions, and only in this case can one arrive at the true comprehension of what life is after
death and resurrection. He proceeds by explaining that all that exists in the world of Nasut, which
He also calls the “world of limitations” ('alam-i-hudud), whatever may be its name (ism), form (rasm),
appearance (surat) or characteristics (vasf), exists in the divine worlds in an appearance (shuhudi) and a
manifestation (zuhuri) which is appropriate to each of these worlds. The things which exist in the
spiritual worlds thus exist in these worlds with totally different characteristics from those of the world
below, in such manner that no category of our understanding such as place, extent, form or time
can apply them86.

What Baha’u’llah says here is very different from what Muslim philosophy affirmed, and in

Ibid., p. 125.
This taste has been preserved until today if one judges by various recent appearances.
Op. cit., p. 120. Translator’s Note: Loosely citing Gospel of Luke 20:34-36; also found in modified working
in Gospel of Gospel of Matthew 22:29-30, Gospel of Mark 12:24-25.
86Ibid.

particular the Ishraqi or Shaykhi philosophy of his time. In Ishraqi philosophy, to every thing of this world is attached an intelligible reality (haqa'iq) which exists in Malakut or in the world of images ('alam-i-mithal). It is thus that this world (Nasut) is the mirror of the other world, as in Plato's myth of the Cave. But for Baha'u'llah it is not only the world of Malakut and the world of Nasut which are the image of each other, but a plurality of worlds which he calls divine (ilahi). In several places he insists upon this plurality in speaking of innumerable worlds87.

Death in this world is thus but the disappearance of forms and appearances. It never touches the "reality" (haqiqat) and the "essence" (dhat) of beings, for the spiritual reality (haqa'iq) of things exists in each world with a manifestation adapted to each of these worlds corresponding to degrees of different realities, which is to say to different ontological levels88.

This explains why it is that everything that man does in this lower world affects his "essential reality" in the other worlds. Thus our acts and words live on from one world to the other89, and though manifested in this world are found again in Malakut. There is no avenging God Who judges and condemns us, but rather the consequences of our actions follow us into the next world. God does not intervene except to pardon the sinner and to assist him in surmounting the handicap which he has created for himself.

Baha'u'llah continues with this theme by explaining that if we wish to comprehend the way in which the reality of things is manifested in the infinite worlds, the only fashion in which we can approach this comprehension is to utilize metaphorical images. The best image that we can find is that of sleep, because sleep is just like death. It is so similar, that one can say that sleep and death are brothers. It happens sometimes that we see things in our dreams that are unintelligible and without relation to our lives. Yet, if we ask for the interpretation of these dreams from a specialist, this one will explain that the things we have seen in our dream are symbolic representations of other things, and once we have understood the key to this interpretation and the

correspondence between the
symbol and the reality, we see that the things which we have seen in dream corresponded to real
situations in our lives. The only difference, in this case, between the world of sleep and the world of
waking is that these things appear in one form in the world of sleep and in another in the world of
waking. The world after death, that is to say Malakut or the Kingdom of Abha, is like the world of
sleep. The things which we see in the temporal world may also appear in the other world, but in
another form which can be as far removed from the reality of this lower world as the metaphorical
language of our dreams.

In another Tablet, Baha'u'llah explains that we cannot comprehend the metaphorical character of
this lower world in relation to the spiritual worlds without comprehending the nature of the soul. He
says in speaking of the soul that "It is, in itself, a testimony that beareth witness to the existence of a
world that is contingent, as well as to the reality of a world that hath neither beginning nor end."90 It
is the absence of any spatial and temporal reference in the spiritual worlds which makes these so
different from our world, and which ultimately renders them incomprehensible to us. It is for this

Ibid., p. 121. In Arabic, la-tuhsa.
It is we who interpret here.
Op. cit., p. 121.
English: GL, LXXXII, pp. 161-162; French: EEB, LXXXII, p. 150.

reason that a comparison can be made between the world of dreams and the spiritual world (after
death), because the dream is the only experience which man can have in this world which is exempt
from space and time. Baha'u'llah says:

"Behold how the dream thou hast dreamed is, after the lapse of many years, re-enacted
before thine eyes. Consider how strange is the mystery of the world that appeared to thee
in thy dream."91

In the "Lawh-i-Haqqu'n-Nas", in order to illustrate his point with an example, Baha'u'llah cites the
dream of Joseph. Joseph dreamed that the sun, the moon and twelve stars

prostrated themselves before him. This dream announced the imminent ascension of Joseph to the rank of the Pharaoh's prime minister and to the arrival of his family in Egypt, who prostrated themselves before him without recognizing his real identity. Baha'u'llah points out that the world of dreams is strange inasmuch as in that world the father and mother appear in the form of the sun and the moon, and the brothers in the form of stars92. This shows to what extent the forms and representations of this world are different from the forms and representations of the world of waking. The difference between the world below and the world of death, he says, is of the same order.

To explain the metaphorical link which ties the changing of forms from one world to another, Baha'u'llah cites another example. Let us imagine that in the springtime a powerful man robs a weak man of his provision of seeds and that he plants these seeds in his own garden. The seeds germinate and in summer produce plants, trees and ultimately fruits. Then, it befalls that a just king decides to redress the wrong that was done to the weak one. In what manner should this just king proceed? Should he require from the oppressor that he return the same quantity of seeds? At harvest-time the seeds are of no immediate utility. Or should he return to him the product of the seeds that were stolen from him? We understand immediately that justice requires that we return to the victim not the original seeds but that which they produced. The seeds changed in form, they were transformed into something else, the appearance and the qualities of which are only distantly related to their first appearance and qualities. The relationship between this world and the other world is of the same nature, and of the same nature also is the nature of justice that links the two.
Here below things exist only in the state of seed. When they evolve in the divine worlds, they are completely transformed in form, appearance and qualities. Nevertheless, the qualities of the tree and of the fruit depend upon the qualities of the seed that produced them.

In this Tablet, Baha'u'llah proceeds with a digression of a moral rather than a metaphysical character. He indicates that it does not matter much what we lose in this life.

In due course, the
good things of this world show their true colors, becoming tests and of
calamities in our spiritual
evolution, while tests and calamities prove to be the source of true riches. At
the final count, the fact
that we have lost material goods for spiritual reasons, whether we have offered
them to God in a
spirit of detachment, or lost them because of the oppression of men, makes no
difference. The man
who robs another man of his wealth removes from him a portion of the tests that
weigh upon his
victim's shoulders. In this subtle manner, Baha’u’llah explains that the
principle of “Haqqu'n-Nas”
can not apply to material goods. One cannot pay these material debts in the
next world, when he

Ibid., p. 162; Ibid., p. 150.
“MA,” volume VII, p. 122.

who has unjustly seized the goods of another in order to accumulate his own
riches has in fact but
accumulated obstacles to his own spiritual development. Without fail, the
consequences of our
actions follow us from one world to the next.

12. The hermeneutic character of the nomenclature of the divine worlds

This first chapter has permitted us to introduce the notion of the divine
worlds as found in the
“Tablet of All Food” and to present a sort of synthesis of what we find
regarding these worlds
throughout the writings of Baha’u’llah. We have not however precisely
defined this nomenclature
and its relation to the metaphysics of Baha’u’llah. This will be the
purpose of the following chapters.
In brief, the reader who peruses the writings of Baha’u’llah would be
mistaken in believing that
Baha’u’llah, in the “Tablet of All Food” wished to explain his
metaphysical conception of the divine
worlds. If this was the case, there would not be many differences between
Baha’i metaphysics and
Muslim metaphysics. We will see on the contrary that the metaphysical system of
Baha’u’llah is
composed of only three worldsviii: the World of the divine Essence
('alam-i-haqq), the World of
Revelation ('alam-i-amr), and the World of Creation ('alam-i-khalq). The
problem which is posed then

is to relate this threefold metaphysical system to the nomenclature of the divine worlds as it is found in the “Tablet of All Food”, and in its other significant variations in writings of Baha’u’llah. The solution to this problem that is here proposed is that the system of the four divine worlds in the “Tablet of All Food” is not for Baha’u’llah a metaphysical system which claims to describe an objective and independent reality, but rather a hermeneutical scheme the purpose of which is both exegetical and theosophical. This is what Baha’u’llah himself underlines when he says that the word “food” has a meaning in each of the four worlds that he cites. This is a very beautiful example of the spiritual hermeneutic (ta'wil) which Baha’u’llah practices in a number of his writings, and in particular in the “Book of Certitude” (Kitab-i-Iqan).” This does not mean however that there is no link between this hermeneutical system and the metaphysical system of Baha’u’llah. The points of crossing are on the contrary numerous. Both proceed from the principle that the fundamental reality of the universe is beyond the capacity of language to describe it. Every attempt to describe it is thus an incomplete and partial attempt, and several complementary points of view may be called for to reach a more complete understanding of reality.

In the continuation of this study we will begin by privileging the “archeological” point of view, that is to say that we will retrace the entire history of the evolution of the terms and concepts employed by Baha’u’llah to show how he utilizes and interprets this historical heritage. We will show thereafter that when Baha’u’llah refers to the philosophical tradition, it is often in order to veil the audacity of his own thought. In reality, the conceptions which Baha’u’llah develops regarding the divine worlds, upon the unfolding of Being and upon the existence of spiritual “realities” have virtually no kinship with the metaphysical developments of Islam upon these same subjects.

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

CHAPTER TWO:
THE KINGDOM OF ABHA

1. The Kingdom of Abha as the world of spirits

Is Malakut identical with the Kingdom of Abha (Malakut-i-Abha)?

One must begin by affirming that the expression “Kingdom of Abha” is used by ‘Abdu’l-Baha, who speaks of it principally as the spiritual world from which divine confirmations come and the world to which we repair after death. The “Kingdom of Abha” does not therefore necessarily belong in the hierarchy of the spiritual worlds which we have earlier described.

The epithet “Abha” attached to the word “Malakut” is the superlative of Baha' (glory, splendour), and thus evokes at the same time the name of Baha’u’llah and one of the essential attributes of God. It is the “very glorious Kingdom”, or the “Kingdom of the Most Glorious”. Hence, the name is at the same time an homage to Baha’u’llah that places the Kingdom under his authority, and a reference to the divine glory which is the essential characteristic thereof, a characteristic which the spirits that inhabit it and the souls which enter it are destined to share.

If one reads the Baha’i writings carefully, one notices that the Kingdom of Abha is at the same time the world of the afterlife and a spiritual world distinct from other worlds. The Kingdom of Abha is before all else the world of the spirits or of the Spirit93. Secondarily, it is the world of the deceased souls. Soul or spirit, according to the terminology that one has chosen to adopt, is the immortal essence found in man and which animates him. ‘Abdu’l-Baha explains that the soul is not found in the body, for the soul is sanctified from all notions of place and of space94. As the soul communicates with our consciousness by the intermediary of the spirit (the intellect, pillar of our faculty of thought), and as it is strongly linked to our identity, we have become accustomed to thinking that the soul is identical with this consciousness which is manifested through the mediation of our physical body; but the soul being a spiritual being, never leaves the spiritual world, and this spiritual world is nothing other than Malakut.

If we now search to retrace the life of the soul in the spiritual world, we will see that it passes through at least three phases: prior to the terrestrial life, during the terrestrial life, and after the terrestrial life.

2. The mystery of pre-existence

Before the terrestrial life, the soul is found in a state which Baha'u'llah calls pre-existence. The soul being an essence, it is eternal, to the extent that creation itself is eternal. However, to say that in pre-eternity the soul exists or does not exist is but a question of one's point of view. That which exists in

'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Some Answered Questions," LXVII, p. 281; French: "Les Lecons de Saint-Jean d'Acre," LXII, p. 246. ("...the life of the Kingdom is the life of the Spirit...")
Ibid., p. 280; Ibid., p. 246.

pre-existence cannot even been considered as a trace of Being, but constitutes only a capacity of existence. This form of Being does not constitute what we call Existence from a purely human point of view, for in pre-existence the soul is deprived of all that we are accustomed to consider as the essential attributes of existence, such as individuality, identity and personality. It is only but by its passage into this world that the soul acquires these three attributes. It is also possible that these three terms describe a unique phenomenon. It is in individuating (tafrid) that the soul acquires its identity (huwiyya) and it is upon this identity that the terrestrial personality will construct itself. The passage from pre-existence to existence permits this differentiation of the soul that is at the origin of active consciousness.

In no case should one comprehend here that the soul can have any kind of existence before conception. The term "pre-existence" is particularly paradoxical. It signifies before all else the fact that the soul is not created from nothingness but that it is an emanation of the divine worlds and thus, as Shoghi Effendi writes "the depository of the ancient and divine mystery of God"95. Pre-existence is a non-existence that is distinguished from nothingness. Furthermore, this non-existence already has the capacity to receive the divine in itself and it is this capacity to receive the divine in the form of the "sign of God" (ayyat'ullah) which permits it to pass from non-being to Being. The state of pre-existence is situated outside of time, for pre-existence does not

know any notion of
duration. It is a purely virtual existence that is distinguished from potential existence. The potential
existence is the existence of the tree in the seed, while this virtual existence can be compared to the
existence of the posterity of a couple who do not yet have a child but will one day. From the point of
view of conscious existence this pre-existence is like nothingness, but without pre-existence, the soul
could not arrive at existence. This virtual existence already possesses all the potentialities of Being. In
order to enable us to comprehend that existence in pre-eternity is different from nothingness,
Baha'u'llah explains that the Covenant that God established between men and His Manifestation
was effected in pre-eternity. In this pre-eternity, all the souls were summoned from their virtual
existence in order to witness the establishment of the Covenant.

In the "Hidden Words" Baha'u'llah writes:

"O My friends! Call ye to mind that covenant ['ahd] ye have entered into with Me upon
Mount Paran, situate within the hallowed precincts of Zaman. I have taken to witness the
concourse on high and the dwellers in the city of eternity, yet now none do I find faithful
unto the covenant ['ahd]. Of a certainty pride and rebellion have effaced it from the hearts,
in such wise that no trace thereof remaineth. Yet knowing this, I waited and disclosed it
not."96

"Paran" is an other name for Mount Sinai; "Mount Paran" thus symbolizes the place of the meeting of
the divine Manifestation with the Divinity, that is to say the source and the most elevated point of
Revelation. "Zaman" signifies simply "Time". Baha'u'llah wishes to say here that all souls, in their

Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 5 January 1948, published in "Lights of Guidance," e. Helen Hornby,
1983, # 1012, p. 375. ("Concerning your question concerning the passage from the "Seven Valleys" which
refers to pre-existence, this does not suppose in any case the existence of the individual soul before
conception. The word has not been translated in an absolutely adequate manner and what it signifies is that
the soul of man is the depository of the ancient and divine mystery of God.")

Bahá'u'lláh, "Persian Hidden Words," #71; French: PCP, trad. Lucienne Migette, Bruxelles, 1988, p. 57.

pre-existence, were in his presence upon Mount Paran and at that moment accepted his Covenant.
This Covenant was a sacred promise97 taken in the most elevated of the celestial spheres, in the
presence of the celestial Assembly, that is to say the Celestial Concourse98 which gathers all the souls
of the saints and the martyrs who are the source of the inspiration of this world, and in the presence
of the inhabitants of the celestial city99 who are the souls of the prophets. In one of his Tablets100,
'Abdu'l-Baha explained that the Covenant which is here referred to is the Testament of
Baha'u'llah101 which he revealed in Palestine102. This signifies that the Covenant which Baha'u'llah
put down in his Testament is not of a purely contractual nature such as a normal juridical
document, but is in fact a spiritual link which exists between the divine Manifestation and the soul of
the creatures, a link which goes back to their pre-existence. Of course, one must not understand that
the souls, in their pre-existence, truly encountered Baha'u'llah. This is a purely metaphorical
encounter which signifies that in coming to the world the soul was already gifted with the capacity to
recognize the divine Manifestation. The spiritual capacities with which the soul comes into this
world constitute its pre-existence. In another of the "Hidden Words," Baha'u'llah also alluded to the
Covenant between himself and the souls in pre-existence:

"O My friends! Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and
blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of
life (shajarat anisaa) , which is planted in the all-glorious paradise (firdus a'zam)? Awestruck ye
listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! Prefer not your own
will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with
lifeless hearts, defiled with worldly desires and cravings. Would ye but sanctify your souls, ye
would at this present hour recall that place and those surroundings, and the

truth of My
utterance should be made evident unto all of you."103

"The Tree of Life" or the "Tree of Anisa" here has the same meaning as Mount Paran in the
preceding passage. Here also, it is the highest point that a soul can attain in its encounter with the
divine Manifestation. In the same Tablet we mentioned earlier, 'Abdu'l-Baha explained that the tree
of life represents Baha'u'llah and "the true and radiant morn" the manifestation of the Bab. The
Covenant of Baha'u'llah was already contained in the Covenant of the Bab. This is a single
Covenant that is the Covenant which exists between the creature and all the. This primal covenant
is part of the spiritual potential of every human soul. 'Abdu'l-Baha added that the expression "those

This passage evokes the reading from the Qur'an (VII:172) in which God brought forth from nothingness
all the souls and commanded them to recognize Him as the sovereign of the universe in posing the question:
"Am I not your Lord?"
In Persian: "Mala-i-a'la"
In Persian: "Ashab-i mada'in-i baqa"
"Asraru'l-Athar," volume V, p. 39.
The testament of Bahá'u'lláh is also called "The Book of My Covenant" (Kitab-i-'Ahdi). cf. English:
"Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh," pp. 217-223; "Bahá'í World Faith,"
pp. 207-210; French: "Foi Mondiale Bahá'í,"
2e edition, Bruxelles, 1968, pp. 369-375.
Shoghi Effendi, "God Passes By," pp. 237-243; French: "Dieu passe pres de nous," pp. 295-299; Hasan
Balyuzi, "Bahá'u'lláh, King of Glory," pp. 420-425.
Bahá'u'lláh, "Persian Hidden Words," #19; French: PCP, p. 36.

hallowed and blessed surroundings" designated the soul and the heart104 of man105.
The soul of man can not have any memory of pre-existence. This is one of the differences between
the soul of man and the soul of the divine Manifestations. The Manifestations are endowed with an
individuality and with an identity even before they appear in this world, and this pre-existent
identity enables them to remain always in contact with the divine worlds106. It is this absence of
individuality, of personality and of identity in the human being that

determines that pre-existence as other than a sui generis form of existence and which therefore implies no consciousness. The pre-existence of the human soul can be compared to the passage from non-being to Being. For man, minerals exist, but as they are not endowed with life and with all the attributes of human existence, for a man to be changed into a stone would be equivalent to his return to nothingness. Yet stones exist and this existence manifests itself, as ‘Abdu’l-Baha says, in “the mineral spirit.” The degrees that separate the mineral spirit from the human spirit are such that we consider that the one is non-existent in relation to the other. The same relation exists between pre-existence and existence. It is for this reason that ‘Abdu’l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi have said that the true life of the soul begins with the conception of the embryo107. Pre-existence is distinguished from nothingness by the fact that it possesses this capacity to pass one day into existence and that it contains in this virtual state all the attributes of being and its own determinism. Certain authors have written that pre-existence is the existence of things in the thought of God108. Nevertheless it is not certain that such a principle would be compatible with the teachings of Baha’u’llah. He and ‘Abdu’l-Baha alluded to this problem, but it seems likely that the allusions to the existence of things in the thought of God in the Baha’i writings must rather be understood in a metaphorical sense.

Everything we have said regarding pre-existence does not inhibit the Baha’is from believing that the life of the soul and its development begin with the embryo. Shoghi Effendi writes:

“With regard to the soul of man. According to the Baha’i Teachings the human soul starts with the formation of the human embryo, and continues to develop and pass through endless stages of existence after its separation from the body. Its progress is thus infinite.”109

Even as it is impossible for man to comprehend life after death110, it is impossible for him to comprehend the nature of the soul. It being impossible for us to comprehend the nature of the soul111, even less are we able to grasp its origin and its formation. The only

sure thing that we find in

In Persian: “Jan-u-dil,” less precise and more poetic as metaphysical terms than the Arabic terminology
which Bahá’u’lláh usually utilizes.
“Asraru'l-Athar,” volume V, p. 39.
Same as (62).
Ibid., #1128, p. 413.
This is the position taken by 'Ali-Murad Davudi in his book, “Uluhiyyat va Mazhariyyrat.”
Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 31 December 1937, in “Lights of Guidance,” 2e edition, New Delhi,
1988, #680, p. 204.
Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 19 January 1942, in Ibid., #702, p. 209. (“The Guardian feels that,
while there is no harm in speculation on these abstract matters, one should not attach to much importance
to them. Science itself is far from having resolved the question of the nature of matter, and we cannot, in this
physical world, grasp the spiritual one more than in a very fragmentary and inadequate manner.”)
GL: LXXXI, p. 156 (EEB: LXXXI, p. 145): “The nature of the soul after death can never be described,

the Baha’i writings on this subject are the very brief allusions to pre-existence, as for example when
Baha’u’llah writes in the “The Hidden Words”: “O son of man! Veiled in My immemorial being
(qidami dhati) and in the ancient eternity of My essence (azaliyyati kaynunati)112, I knew My love for
thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image (mithali) and revealed to thee My
beauty (jamali).”113 We also find the affirmation that the soul is an emanation of the worlds of
God114.

We will return in Chapter XIII to the concept of emanation and its significance in the Baha’i
writings. However, it is important to note that these writings say that the human soul is an
emanation of the worlds of God and not of God Himself, as believed by various Christian and
Muslim schools influenced by Neoplatonism. The conditions of this emanation remain totally
unexplained in the writings of Baha’u’llah, and it would be in vain for us to wish to go beyond the
very fragmentary references thereto which have been cited already. The world of

pre-existence will
remain forever an unfathomable mystery for man.

3. The soul and the world

The transition from pre-existence to existence permits the soul to achieve individual life and thus to
acquire the self-consciousness necessary to its maturation and spiritual progress. This world is like
the humus in which one plants the seed so that it will germinate and begin its growth. For this
purpose, the soul has need of a provisional vehicle which is the body. The consciousness which
animates the body is a complex phenomenon engendered by the interaction between the animal
psyche of man—in other words his terrestrial self (nafs)—and the celestial self which is the real
identity of the soul.

The celestial self, which has its seat in the soul, communicates with the body through its intellective
('aqli) activity, that is to say through the faculty of reason ('aql) which, says Baha'u'llah, emanates
from the soul as do the rays of a lamp, and which possesses the property of reflecting in the mirror of
the self (nafs). This relation of the soul with the self explains the relationship of the spiritual world
with the physical world, a relationship which is itself in the image of the relation which God

nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men." Translator's Note: Also see
GL: CLXV, pp. 345, 346: "The mysteries of man's physical death and of his return have not been divulged,
and still remain unread…As to those that have tasted of the fruit of man's earthly existence, which is the
recognition of the one true God, exalted be His glory, their life hereafter is such as We are unable to
describe. The knowledge thereof is with God, alone, the Lord of all worlds."
The Arabic expression literally means "the pre-existence of my being". "Kaynuna" is a term which
designates "the being" of God in contradistinction to "wujud" which designates the Being (esse) or the
existence of the creatures. The word is of Syriac origin and also signifies "nature" in the sense in which one
can speak of the two "natures" of Christ. It might be useful to reintroduce this term as "nature" in our
translations as in this case: "Hidden...in the eternity of My nature..."
The pre-existence of God signifies the

time in which God existed before being creator. Inasmuch as God has always been creator, this refers to a
purely ontological past which corresponds to the “Hidden Treasure” and to “the unmanifest identity”
(ghayb-i-huvviyyih). This is one of the texts which is cited by those who believe that all beings first existed in the
thought of God.
“Majmu'iy-i-mubarakih,” p. 18; English: “Arabic Hidden Words,” #10; French: p. 10.
Adib Taherzadeh, “The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh,” Oxford, 1992, pp. 6, 7, 10.

maintains with His creation, as we will see later on. Reason, or the intellective faculty, is an
emanation of the soul in the spiritual world which directly affects the self in the physical world. This
explains why the sensible world (Nasut or Mulk) is constructed like a transparent reflection of the
spiritual world, as was explained in the preceding Chapter.

Hence the expression “Kingdom of Abha” (Malakut-i-Abha) has a much broader meaning than the
word Malakut as it is defined in the framework of an ontological system which includes several other
worlds like Jabarut and Nasut. In the writings of Baha’u’llah, the word Malakut can assume an
inclusive meaning which encompasses the whole of the spiritual worlds.

The pair Malakut-Nasut sometimes expresses the duality that the ancient philosophers expressed
when they opposed the intelligible world to the sensible world. We have already demonstrated that
this classic opposition is only symbolic in Baha’i thought. In effect, in Baha’i thought, the hierarchy
of worlds serves above all to express their interdependence. The physical world cannot then be
considered as inferior to the spiritual world, because the physical world derives from the spiritual
world and the spiritual world would not be perfect without it.

To every physical reality there corresponds a spiritual reality. But, as we will have occasion to
develop, this does not correspond in any way to the Platonic “ideas” or to the opposition of “form”
and “matter” in Aristotelian philosophy.

The link that exists between the soul and the body is there to remind us of this interdependence

between spiritual and physical reality. The spiritual world is a world of spirit. The spirit, in a certain fashion, is the essence of things. But, the Holy Spirit created the world in order to permit the differentiation of different forms of spirit and to open the way to a new form of evolution. To comprehend the nature of the links which unite the soul with the body, permits one to comprehend the link of the manifestations of the spirit with the universe, for it is thus that ‘Abdu’l-Baha explains, that every created thing is endowed with a form of spirit115.

The soul is not something which is added to the body. It is not the “form” of the body as Saint Thomas believed. Nor can one say that the soul is pure thought as Descartes said. The soul, according to ‘Abdu’l-Baha, is rather like a principle of life, a gem that is situated at the heart of Being. It is a hidden reality the existence of which does not manifest itself except in obscurity. Our thoughts and our psychic life are not the manifestations of the soul, even though the soul can influence them. As long as the soul is linked to the body, it can not deploy its full capacities. It is still in a period of formation, of gestation and of education which is precisely the “raison d'etre” of our terrestrial life. In this sense, one can say that the existence of the soul depends upon the existence of the world, but in another sense one can show that this world would not exist without the spiritual world. The soul is thus the intermediary that links the two worlds one to another.

There is much to be written on this subject but to digress would risk conducting us beyond our present purpose. There exist many writings of Baha’u’llah on the nature of the soul and on life after death, but the soul only interests us here to the extent that it is a sign of the spiritual world. The full treatment of the relation of the soul with these two worlds would unfailingly raise up numerous epistemological and noetic questions which in order to be worthily resolved would require a

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Some Answered Questions,” XXXVI, pp. 163-166; French: XXXVI, pp. 149-151.

complete explanation of the metaphysic of Baha’u’llah. Among these

questions, one would have to ask how it is that the soul knows spiritual realities and if it can share this consciousness with our consciousness, or if, which is a distinct question, our consciousness, that is to say our mortal psyche, can approach spiritual realities. All philosophies have been aimed at answering these questions. To attempt to resolve them in this case would be premature as long as we have not yet established the nature of the spiritual realities. This is what we try to do in the latter part of this book.

4. The three spheres of Malakut

The infinite worlds which are found in the writings of Baha'u'llah, are they part of the Kingdom of Abha and of Malakut? On the one hand, in Malakut there are three different dimensions, which are the dimension of the pre-existence of souls, the dimension of terrestrial existence, and the dimension of the souls. It is the dimension of the souls that the qualification of Kingdom of Abha is related. On the other hand, the Kingdom of Abha encompasses in within its limits worlds infinite in number, worlds that correspond to the degrees of the perfectibility of the soul.

One can ask oneself at this point whether the worlds that are included in the Kingdom of Abha are radically different from each other such as in the case of the sensible world and the spiritual world. Through the examination of these texts it is probable that one will conclude that the differences which characterize these worlds are of the same nature as those which characterize the worlds of the "Tablet of All Food." To employ a simile, one could say that these worlds are characterized by differing intensities, and that the variation of intensity from one to another is progressive and continuous.

One might also consider whether the worlds which we encounter in these text correspond to the "stations" (maqamat) and "degrees" (rutbat) which other texts speak of, and if so, then in every world there exist stations and degrees.

We have seen that Malakut, as a world of souls is a hierarchical world. Baha'u'llah expresses this hierarchy by what he calls the "station" (maqam). Every soul has a station

in this world and in the other. Our personal station depends upon two things: on the spiritual potentialities with which our soul was endowed by divine decree, and on our efforts to actualize those potentialities. The nature of Malakut being spiritual, the souls in that world live in relation to the spirituality which they have acquired in this world. It is the level of this spirituality that determines the station of the individual.

Baha'u'llah tells us however that this does not mean that the souls of different stations are not conscious of each other…on the contrary. Even as in this life we see that individuals manifest different degrees of intelligence, even so in the other world the souls manifest different degrees of spirituality. This hierarchy does not imply any condemnation. It is not because we have arrived at a station that we will suffer by not arriving at a superior station, in the same fashion that in this world nobody feels suffering by being less intelligent than another man. The other world is only a dispenser of joy. We all know that there are men who surpass us in intelligence, but that does not create a problem in our lives. One could even say that social life would be impossible if there were not an inequality and diversity of the various forms of intelligence. On the other hand, we can suffer if, having failed our "tests" we are condemned to live mediocre lives. In the same fashion, the soul can feel regret in that it has failed to develop the spiritual potential with which it was endowed. The difference between the station (maqam) and the state (hal), is that the station is definitive. Never can

any soul change its station although it can know numerous changes of states. It is because of this that Baha'u'llah has sometimes spoken of different stations as different worlds. From the work of the mathematician Cantor, we know that there are infinities which are more or less large in relation to other infinities. This is an illustration of this principle.

To every soul is destined a station to which a form of "service" (khidmat) corresponds, for spiritual life in the other world is a life of service. It is service that truly qualifies and differentiates one station in

relation to another. The nature of this service can not be understood in this world. It is possible
sometimes that man has the choice between different stations, as is the case for the martyr. Some
accept martyrdom and hasten to it, while others prefer to avoid it. It is for this reason that we speak
of destination and not of predestination. He who fails to attain the station for which he was created
finds himself deprived of the service that was destined for him. But there are different ways of
arriving at the destined station. These ways constitute the “degrees”. Even within a particular
station, the soul can always elevate itself from degree to degree.

5. The leaven which leavens the world

Another aspect of the Kingdom of Abha is that it shelters the soul of the prophets and of the elect. In
truth, rather than consider it a hierarchical succession of worlds, one can understand the Kingdom
of Abha as a hierarchical succession of souls, with the souls of the prophets at its summit, the souls of
the martyrs and saints below them, and after them the other souls according to their station and
merit.

Certain texts insist upon the influence that the souls of the Kingdom of Abha exercise upon the
world. Baha’u’llah writes:

“The souls which these souls radiate is responsible for the progress of the world and the
advancement of its peoples. They are like unto leaven which leaveneth the world of being,
and constitute the animating force through which the arts and wonders of the world are
made manifest. Through them the clouds rain their bounty upon men, and the earth
bringeth forth its fruits. All things must needs have a cause, a motive power, an animating
principle. These souls and symbols of detachment have provided, and will continue to
provide, the supreme moving impulse in the world of being.”116

This faculty is not reserved to the souls of the prophets. All the souls of the righteous exercise an
influence upon this world, as Baha’u’llah writes in another Tablet:

“The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in

His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the
Almighty hath created can benefit through him. Such a soul provideth, at the bidding of the
Ideal King and Divine Educator, the pure leaven that leaveneth the world of being, and
furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest.
Those souls that are symbols of detachment are the leaven of the world."117

English: GL, LXXXI, p. 157; French: EEB, LXXXI, p. 146.
English: GL, LXXXII, p. 161; French: EEB, LXXXII, p. 150. Upon this same theme cf. "Ma'idiy-i-

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CHAPTER THREE:
THE ARAMAIC ORIGINS OF THE NOMENCLATURE OF THE DIVINE WORLDS

1. Malakut in the Qur'an

In the nomenclature of the divine worlds which we have seen, only one of the terms, Malakut, is of
Quranic origin. The other terms are later creations the tracing of which is particularly instructive.

The Qur'an possesses four references to Malakut. This word, in its Quranic sense, seems to have two
meanings and these are related closely to each other. The first meaning is that of "sovereignty" and
of "power".

In the Surah of the Believers [Suratu'l-mU'minUna], we read this injunction addressed to the
unbelievers:

"Say: 'In whose hands is the sovereignty [malakUt] of all things, protecting all, while against
Him there is no protection?'"118

In the Surah of Ya Sin [Suratu Yasin] we find a verse very similar to the first:

"Glory be to Him who has control [malakUt] over all things. To Him you shall all be
recalled."119

As we see no specific allusion is made to a divine world in either of these verses. The second
meaning of the word which we find in the Qur'an is that of "Kingdom" and more particularly the
"Kingdom of the heavens and of the earth," as in the Surah of the Cattle

[Surata'l-an'am] where it is written:

“Thus did We show Abraham the kingdom [malakUt] of the heavens and the earth, so that
he might become a firm believer.”120

We find the same expression in a verse of the Surah of the Heights
[Surata'l-a'raf]:

“Will they not ponder upon the kingdom [malakUt] of the heavens and the earth, and all that
God created, to see whether their hour is not drawing near? And in what other revelation
will they believe, those that deny this one?”121

Asmani,” volume IV, p. 20.
Qur'an, XXIII:88.
Qur'an, XXXVI:83.
Qur'an, VI:75.
Qur'an, VII:185.

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The indication we find in the Qur'an is that there exists a Kingdom of the heavens and of the earth
but upon the nature of that Kingdom we are not particularly informed. In relating these verses to
each other, we understand however that this Kingdom is defined as the empire over which God
exercises His sovereignty; an empire which encompasses at the same time the physical world and the
spiritual world, and in fact everything that was created (kullu shay, all things). Malakut, in the Quranic
sense, is not then a kingdom distinct from this world; on the contrary, the physical world is clearly
found to be included within its limits. In the four verses cited here it is difficult to find material that
could enflame human imaginations. From whence then came the prolific usage of the term Malakut?

It is probable that the word Malakut so attracted the first Muslims because this word appeared
foreign to the Arabic language, and was thus endowed with a perfume of mystery. The word is
clearly not Arabic, for Arabic does not possess a suffix in “Ut”. On the other hand, the term did not
offer any semantic difficulty. Its meaning appears in the three letter root MLK which is common to
most of the Semitic languages, and which we find just as easily in Amharic, in Yemenite, in

Chaldean, in Sumerian, in Hebrew, in Syriac and in Aramaic as well as Arabic. The root MLK refers to the idea of possession and sovereignty. We find it in the Arabic “malik” (king), “mamlaka” (kingdom) and “mulk” (dominion). In Ethiopic the word “malakot” serves to designate the Divinity, for this language does not possess the Semitic root 'LH. A few linguists have suggested that the Quranic utilization of “malakUt” derives from Ethiopic. The Semitic languages are so close to each other that between them there are numerous cases of semantic contamination. However the existence of similar forms from one language to another does not necessarily imply a case of borrowing. The “malkUtO” of Syriac had no influence upon our “malakUt” even though Syriac has a very great linguistic, geographical, cultural and chronological proximity with the Arabic language.

Previous scholarship has that the term “malakUt” was borrowed from Aramaic, like a great number of other Quranic terms. We know that in the VIIth century, the Arabic dialect of Mecca that served to record the Qur'an was a language which did not possess a written literature, with the exception of some 98 epigraphical inscriptions, and that its oral literature was composed entirely of poems mostly of the epic variety. This explains why all the terms found in the Qur'an which contained a religious significance were borrowed from other languages possessing a more developed religious culture. These borrowings were from Hebrew (malak, for angel), from Aramaic (malakUt, tAbUt), from Greek (barzakh), from Pahlavi (dIn for religion, sirat for the bridge which spans hell), etc. In this context, it is thus not surprising that “malakUt” should be confirmed as a Aramaic term.

We can ask ourselves why the Prophet Muhammad would have had to employ a foreign term when he could have used equivalent words in the Meccan dialect. The response is perhaps that the words in Arabic appeared to him to be too concrete and too prosaic, too marked by daily life or too charged with ancient cultural values linked to the Arab trivial conception of sovereignty. We may wonder if the recourse to a foreign term permitted him to intellectualize and to spiritualize the concept by insisting upon the essentially abstract character of divine

sovereignty as well as upon the
spiritual nature of the Kingdom of God. It is certainly this abstract character which created the
fortune of the word.

It is difficult to know how this Aramaic term was able to penetrate the language of the Qur'an. Also,
the word does not appear to have been of frequent usage in Aramaic. One finds no trace except in
certain “Targum” of later Judaism where one speaks of the “malakUta” (sovereignty) of God, and
one can think that it was probably Jesus, and thereafter the first Christians who popularized the

expression. Hebrew, which itself uses the term, had to borrow it again from Aramaic and normally
used in these places and cases the word “mamlAka”. Nevertheless, the fact that the sources are rare,
does not prevent that there could have existed a more developed oral tradition which already
elevated the Aramaic “malkUt” to the rank of a veritable spiritual Kingdom, and which perhaps had
even made a Kingdom of the angelic powers. We see that there exist numerous indications of this
meaning. It is thus probable that the interest behind the introduction of this word into the Quranic
language resided less in the semantic virginity of the term that would have permitted the
development of an autonomous conception of the divine sovereignty, than in the echo that it
awakened in effecting a bridge between the ancient Judaic tradition and the newborn Quranic
tradition.

2. The Kingdom in Judaic tradition

One may suppose that between the 2nd century before our era and the 6th century [of our era] a
Judaic conception was formed of “malkUt” as the Kingdom of divine sovereigntyix and that “malkUt”
was associated with “gabrUt” or “gebura”x, perhaps not as an independent kingdom or world, but
probably as a particular attribute of “malkUt”. A priori, sovereignty and power are complementary
concepts. It is more probable to imagine that they developed together in order to acquire, bit by bit,
an autonomous existence than to imagine the opposite. For reasons which are

difficult to precisely
articulate, but perhaps finally in conformity with the most ancient Judaic tradition, the Qur'an
retained only “malkUt,” perhaps considering that the concept was plainly sufficient and that it
already included in itself the idea of the power of “gebura”.

“JabarUt” was also borrowed from Aramaic, but through recourse to other paths, for no trace is
found for it in the Qur'an, even though the word appears very early in the language of the Muslim
mystics. In the past there no doubt existed an Aramaic word “gebarUt” or “gebrUt” about which we
are little informed and which derived from the Hebrew “gebUra”. Unfortunately we are not
sufficiently acquainted with the thought of the Jewish communities of Mecca and Medina in order
to know what conception they had of “malkUt” and “gebrUt” and if they associated these two terms.
It is furthermore not sure that “gebrUt” was known to them. It is more probable that the concepts of
“malkUt” and “gebrUt” remained in living use among the Jews of Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt,
and even among Christians who perhaps had adopted the Judaic metaphysical theories, as is
demonstrated in certain writings of the Syriac Fathers such as Ephraem [306?-373] and Aphraate. It
is likely that it was from one of these cultural sources the Muslim mystics, already in possession of
“malakUt” by way of the Qur'an, appropriated “JabarUt”, taking it from Judaic “GebrUt”. We do not
suppose that they would have enacted this borrowing if the two words had not already been
associated by Jews or by Christians, in a metaphysical theory or in a literary or exegetical usage that
has not been transmitted to us. Probably there existed an embryonic system or at least a semantic
association upon which the Muslim mystics constructed their later development. Perhaps this
indicates the trace of an esoteric Judeo-Christian teaching that would not have been transmitted to
us in another form.

Certain Muslim authors, such a Ghazali, hold not only that the Qur'an knew MalakUt, but that the
Prophet was well informed of the existence of JabarUt and that this concept was integral to the
threefold partition of the world which associated the physical world “Mulk”

with these latter two
worlds. In coming to this conclusion he relies upon a “saying” (hadith) of
the Prophet, in which he is

alleged to have declared:

“Blessed is God who governs the physical world (Mulk) and the spiritual
Kingdom (MalakUt)
and who resides in His singularity by the grandeur ['izzat] and power
(JabarUt).”122

Nevertheless, the authenticity of this “hadith” is very much in doubt, and
the triad so dear to
Ghazali, of Mulk-MalakUt-JabarUt united in one system appears more clearly to
reflect the Muslim
thinking of the 10th century than the doctrine set forth in the Qur’an.
Numerous “hadith” were
forged at this epoch to support contemporary theoretical developments.

The “hadith” which we have just cited is probably apocryphal, but it
nevertheless indicates that at the
time at which it was forged, “'izza” and “jabarut” were regarded as
closely related terms, and
probably synonymous. However this is possible only if the Hebrew “gebUra”
that underlies “jabarUt”
is not totally lost to usage at that time.

The word “jabarUt” does not have the same transparency in Arabic as
“malakUt”. The root JBR has
multiple meanings in Arabic. At the same time it means “being restored” and
of “forces”. The verb
“jabara” means “to replace the bones in position”, “to put back on
feet”, “to restore to its original
state” and “to force”, “to oblige”, and “to console”. “Jabr”
also designates the action of returning
bones to their original position, as well as “force”, “coercion”, and
“power”. Hence if the idea of
power exists at its very root but in a very limited sense. It consists in the
power to oblige something
or someone to do the will of another. “Jabr” has come to designate destiny
and predestination.
Furthermore, for the Arab ear the meaning of “JabarUt” was not easy to
grasp through its poly-
Semitic root. To give it a particular meaning of “power” one must have
retained the consciousness
of the Hebrew “gebUra” or the Aramaic “gebrUt”.

It is difficult to advance beyond these conjectures without discovering Hebrew

or Aramaic writings
which may enlighten us. It is not impossible that a study of the Aramaic "targum"xi would prove to be
fruitful for we already know that the two concepts are found there. One might also undertake
research in the manuscripts of Qumran and in Essene thought. Finally, it is not impossible that the
Babylonian Talmud might yield something. But these studies could not be carried out except by
specialists.

Without for the moment entering into profound studies of Judaic thought, at least two pathways
open to us in order to show the relation which MalakUt and JabarUt maintained with these
preceding words. The first path is the study of Christian texts, and in particular the Gospels, which
offer the advantage of having fixed Judaic thought at a very precise date; the second is found in the
Talmud and the Kabbalah.

Whenever we refer to "MalkUt" in its Aramaic or Hebrew version, we always return to the idea of
Kingdom and royalty. But, this idea of "Reign" or "Kingdom of God" is not very familiar to Old
Testament [Biblical] Judaism. It is, as we have indicated earlier, a development of Judaic thought
which began in the 2nd or 1st century before our era, at a time where the perceived division and
opposition between the terrestrial kingdom and the celestial kingdom was hardening. If the concept
The Arabic text of this hadith says exactly: "Al-hamdu'llah mudabiru'l-mulk wa'l-malakUt wa'l-munfaridu bi'l-
'izzati wa'l-jabarUti".

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of a celestial Kingdom is unknown to the Prophets, the idea of divine royalty is on the contrary well
known in the Old Testament Biblical text. The Lord is king (melek) of Israel and Israel is His heir
(nahalah). From this position, there progressively arises an eternal royalty over all the universe123.
This royalty is at the same time terrestrial124 and celestial125.

3. The Kingdom of the heavens in the Gospels

In Christianity the theme disappears because royalty is transferred from God to Christ. However,
the Gospels abundantly speak of the "Kingdom of the heavens" in a context

which leaves to doubt
that the expression must have been in common usage at the time of Jesus in a manner understood
by all, even if the Gospel gives it a new meaning. In fact, it seems that the word “heaven” was, for
the Jews of this epoch, naught a substitute for the word God that it was forbidden to pronounce.
“Kingdom of the heavens” thus means “Kingdom of God”, and there is thus no distinction made
between the celestial kingdom and the terrestrial kingdom, for, as in the Qur'an, the sovereignty of
God (mamlaka) encompasses the earth and the heavens. We must explain here that the heavens
conceived of here were very abstract, for the practice of placing paradise had not yet taken root and
orthodox Judaism at the time of Jesus did not admit the existence of angels or of other spiritual
creatures.

In the Gospels, the Kingdom of the heavens becomes altogether something else from a simple
metaphor which serves to designate the divine Omnipotence. The kingdom of the Gospels is at the
intersection of several dimensions. On the one hand, it would one day encompass the earth and
seem to have a material dimension. In this way Jesus said:

“Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of
death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.”126

One can furthermore ask if the power which is referred to here is not the “gebrUt” which
accompanies “malkUt”.

On the other hand, this Kingdom is situated in a beyond that is difficult to define and which is not
totally synonymous with the beyond of the soul. If on one hand Jesus invites the good thief to sit with
him to the right of his Father, he elsewhere declares:

“Verily I say unto you, I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine, until that day that I drink
it new in the kingdom of God.”127

It is difficult to determine whether this “fruit of the new vine” is material or spiritual.

Psalm 45:8; 145:13; 146:10.
Psalm 29:3; 3:24.

Psalm 93:4; 29:9.
Gospel of Mark 9:1.
Gospel of Mark 14:25.

In other passages, the Kingdom seems to refer to the afterlife situated beyond the material world.
Hence when it is said:

“There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and
Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.

“And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the
south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.”128

The Kingdom of God here greatly resembles the “MalakUt-i-Abha” of Baha’u’llah, populated by the
“celestial Concourse” constituted of the souls of the Prophets and of the elect.

Finally, the Gospel kingdom has a strong eschatological dimension. It is first announced by John the
Baptist129, then by Jesus130, who asks his apostles to announce it in their turn. It must develop
systematically131, but it will be consummated only at the end of times132, after the harvest133, at the
Second Coming134, in order to consummate in a celestial Royalty of the beyond135. It must grow by
itself136 and it will be the lot only of those who form “the little flock”137. If the Kingdom begins in
this world, it does not find its fulfillment except in a spiritual otherness, another dimension apart
from this reality that must have been difficult for the Jews who heard Jesus preach to grasp.

The Gospels, having been written in Greek, make it difficult for us to have an idea of the Aramaic
vocabulary employed by Jesus. In this regard, it is not by chance that the most numerous references
to the Kingdom are in the Gospel of Matthew which is the Gospel closest to rabbinical thinking and
to the extent that it has been suspected that the Greek text of this Gospel was based upon an original
in Aramaic or in Hebrew.

The proclamation of the Kingdom forms the heart of the Gospel message. All of the thirteenth

chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is consecrated to this theme. It is like the seed which one sows138,
or like a mustard seed139. It is like a treasure or fine pearls140, or like a net141. It is the leaven which

Gospel of Matthew 8:11-12; Gospel of Luke 13:28-29.
Gospel of Matthew 3:2.
Gospel of Matthew 4:17; 10:7; Gospel of Luke 10:9,11.
Gospel of Matthew 13:24-31; Gospel of Mark 4:11; 26:30-31; Gospel of Luke 13:18-21.
Gospel of Mark 9:1; 14:25.
Gospel of Mark 4:29; Book of Revelation 14:15.
Gospel of Matthew 16:27; 24:30; 26:64; Gospel of Mark 13:26; 14:62; Gospel of Luke 22:69.
Gospel of Mark 9:47; 14:25.
(106)Gospel of Matthew 13:3-9; Gospel of Mark 4:26-32; Gospel of Luke 8:5-15.
(107)Gospel of Matthew 20:16; 22:14; Gospel of Luke 12:32.
(107a)Gospel of Matthew 13:24; Gospel of Mark 4:12-20; Gospel of Luke 8:11-15.
(108)Gospel of Matthew 13:31; Gospel of Mark 4:30-32; Gospel of Luke 13:18-19.
(109)Gospel of Matthew 13:44.
(110)Gospel of Mathew 13:47.

leaves the meal142.

Every man is summoned to the Kingdom and each must have the chance to enter therein. For this
Matthew gives us the secret:

“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but
he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”143

And the will of the Father is to love one's fellow, practice charity and forgiveness, as depicted in the
parable of the pitiless lender144. One must be poor of heart or poor of spirit145 and become like the
children146.

There would be many called and few chosen. It would be easier for a camel to pass through the
head of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom147 and the scribes and Pharisees are
barred from entry148.

Other aspects of the kingdom are more mysterious. It is already in us or among us149, for it is not an
observable fact. It is mysterious and seems already to be working in the terrestrial world.

If the words of Jesus are sometimes unclear and in apparent contradiction it is, on the one hand, because the Gospel kingdom symbolizes a spiritual and metaphysical dimension difficult to apprehend through language and difficult for questioners to comprehend who are not familiar with rabbinical subtleties. On the other hand, one must not forget that the Jews of the epoch awaited a Messiah who would be their military leader and who would come to restore a terrestrial kingdom the crown of which he would assume.

At the end of this preliminary search we may conclude that the Kingdom of Abha (Malakut-i-Abha) of the Baha'i writings and the Gospel Kingdom are one and the same reality. On the other hand the Quranic Malakut has little relation either to one or the other. It seems to refer to a much more archaic state of Judaic and rabbinical thought. The Qur'an, which is, in general, well informed of Old Testament [Biblical] tradition, has totally ignored Christian tradition on this point. The examination of the Gospel teaches us only that the terms "Kingdom of God" or "Kingdom of the heavens" were terms in common usage in Aramaic in the first century. It is interesting to see that in borrowing the expression, the Qur'an affirmed the sovereignty of God in the heavens and upon the earth (al-samawat wa'l-ard); hence a certain bipolarity was created which favored the splitting of the world into a physical universe and a spiritual universe. This would constitute a major impact of

(111)Gospel of Matthew 13:33; Gospel of Luke 13:20.
(112)Gospel of Matthew 7:21; Gospel of Luke 6:46; 13:25.
(113)Gospel of Matthew 18:23-35.
(114)Gospel of Matthew 5:3; Gospel of Luke 6:20.
(115)Gospel of Matthew 18:1-6.
Gospel of Matthew 9:23-24; Gospel of Mark 10:24-25.
Gospel of Matthew 23:13; Gospel of Luke 11:52.
Gospel of Luke 17:20-21.

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Muslim thought upon Judaism, which does not appear to have had a clear idea of the antinomy of these two dimensions.

It is striking with regard to the concept of Malakut, that Baha'u'llah is

situated closer to the Gospel revelation than to the Quranic or Islamic conception. In Baha'i tradition as in Christian tradition, the Kingdom is first the outcome of the divine will. The eschatological perspective of Christianity is simply replaced in Baha'i thought by the revealed divine will to construct a new civilization that assures the future well-being of man and its efflorescence and that causes the celestial Jerusalem to descend upon earth in a manner that altogether corresponds to Christian eschatology.

The advent of the kingdom of Christ is fulfilled with the proclamation of Baha'u'llah, who announces the beginning of this process. On one hand, he refers to a concrete Kingdom which was prophesied by all the Prophets of the past and which must incarnate itself in the new Order of the world. On the other, there is a spiritual Kingdom. In this regard, the Writings of Baha'u'llah certainly illuminate the teaching of Christ in a new way. Having established the fact that the Kingdom of Abha includes at once the spiritual world and this lower world, without there being uncrossable borders between them, it enables us to conceive of how the Kingdom of Christ can be at the same time of this world and of the next.

It is from this world that we enter into the Kingdom, by doing the will of the Father, said the Christ; in executing the plan of God, as Baha'u'llah would say. The souls of the kingdom, whether they be of this world or not, are the salt of the earth, and the cause of the advancement of humanity. It is because the work of promulgation is the most important that the kingdom is like a net which catches the souls that have the capacity to accept the Cause. It is in proclaiming the establishment of the kingdom from now on, and in calling its builders to join in the work, in the construction of the kingdom in this world, that we enter into the Kingdom of the other world. The souls that are in service to the Cause of God are the doors to the Kingdom. They become agents of the transformation of the world. It is interesting to see Jesus and Baha'u'llah using the same image and comparing the souls who accept the new revelation to be the leaven who cause the meal to rise.

Finally, as the Gospel Kingdom is preceded by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Kingdom of Abha is preceded by the celestial Concourse (mala-i-a'la) bringing together the souls of the Prophets and the saints. A systematic comparison of the two kingdoms would be easy to carry out, and would certainly produce interesting results.

4. The Tenth Sefira of the Kabbalah

We have been able to grasp the reality of the Kingdom just before and after the manifestation of Christ, and we have seen that at this epoch the concept of “Kingdom” began to take on an importance that would be greatly magnified in the message of Christ. We understand for what reasons the Kingdom of Christ was not acceptable as such to contemporary Jews. But is it possible to follow outside of Christianity the career of “MalkUt” and of “JebarUt” before 622 A.D. and after 622 A.D.? For that which is before 622 A.D., we have already partially admitted our ignorance. In fact, the question of “MalkUt” seems to completely disappear from Judaic consciousness during ten centuries, and one would have to await the development of a kabbalistic movement in order to hear it spoken of again; which proves that it was not completely forgotten.

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“MalkUt”, considered as kingdom and sovereignty, appears again in Jewish theology through the intermediary of the ten “sefirot” of the Kabbalah150. We cannot here enter into the problem of the origins of the Kabbalah; these are extremely confused, as is confusing the elaboration of the kabbalistic doctrine which is profoundly influenced by the Arabo-Muslim philosophy and by Neoplatonism. This is what explains that the “sefirot”, originally simple attributes of the Divinity, were later transformed into hypostases, successive emanations from the eternal One. The Kabbalah distinguishes God in His singularity, inaccessible to intelligence, the “En Sof” which corresponds to “Hahut” or the unmanifested essence (huwiyya) in the writings of Baha’u’llah, state in which “the primordial uniqueness” is designated by no name, and, on the other hand, God known in His manifestations which are the “sefirot”. The “sefirot” are thus the

names of divine attributes such as
Wisdom, Intelligence, Love, Beauty, Glory or Power, which are the different aspects by which the
primordial One manifests Himself to the world151.

The lists of “sefirot” among the most ancient kabbalists do not include MalakUt, but, on the other
hand, always mention “Gebura” in the fifth position. It is in “The Book of the Meditations”
(Kawwanat) of Jacob of Lunel that appears, in the 12th century, for the first time, the term “MalkUt”
as the tenth “sefira”. This one takes the place of “shekhina” (divine presence; the “sakina” of the
writings of Baha’u’llah)152 in the later lists. Afterwards, Judah ben Barzilai would identify Glory
(kavod) with “MalkUt”, and Judah Halevi would explain in his turn that “Kavod,” “shekhina” and
“MalkUt” are three aspects of one reality153.

It would be too long here to retrace the elaboration of the concept of “MalkUt” and of “Gebura” in
the kabbalistic thought. We will content ourselves with turning towards a work of maturity, that of
Meir ibn Gabbai. This one expresses himself in a clearly Neoplatonic language which goes back to
Maimonides. For him, the “sefirot” represent the world of Emanation (atsilUt) as opposed to the
world of “En Sof”. Of all the “sefirot”, “MalkUt” is the tenth, that is to say that the one which closes
the procession and thus the furthest removed from the primordial source of the divine essence and
the closest to the world of sensible realities. This suffices to distinguish “MalkUt” from all the other
“sefirot”, for being at the frontier of the sensible realities, it is in a certain way their “mother” and
the essential cause. Ibn Gabbai, in his “Derekh 'EmUna,” describes “MalkUt” as “the point of
junction and of unification between the inferior beings and the superior beings”. Commenting upon
this passage and upon its context, Roland Goetschel writes: “MalkUt is thus taken here as the
receptible of all other entities issued from the cause of causes as well as nexus between this world
above and the world below which permits that it establish a reciprocal relation between these two
worlds”154.

“Sefirot” is the plural of “Sefira”.

The literature concerning the Kabbalah is extremely abundant and diverse. We have contented ourselves
here to recommend the reader to the introductory works of Gershom Sholem, “Major Trends in Jewish
Mysticism,” Schocken Books, 1995; French: “Les grands courents de la mystique juive,” Paris, 1977; and
“Origins of the Kabbalah,” Jewish Publication Society, 1987; French: “Les Origines de la Kabbale,” Paris,
1966. One can also profitably consult N. Sed, “La Mystique cosmologique juive,” Paris, 1981.
Arabic text: “The Fire Tablet and the Tablet of the Holy Mariner,” Langenhain, 1985.
“MajmU'iy-i-MunAjAt,” p. 75.
Roland Goetschel, “Meir ibn Gabbay, le discours de la Kabbale espagnole,” p. 175.

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We do not seek to follow the adventures and misadventures of “MalkUt” in the Kabbalah; these
were fertile, such as how MalkUt can unite with Beauty (Tiferet) in order to incarnate the union of the
king and his spouse, or as, in a beautiful example of spiritual hermeneutic, to typify Rachel in
opposition to reason (bina) incarnated by Leah, or how reason (bina) was able to engender the
heavens typifying Beauty (Tiferet) and the earth typifying MalkUt, or how in another register MalkUt
was able to represent the lower Elohim in the creation from the forces of the heavens and the earth.
These are but simple examples of the fertile imagination of the kabbalists. The proteiform reality of
the kabbalistic MalkUt obliges us to concentrate upon a single one of its aspects, that is to say its
mediatory function which composes a veritable intermediary world, which is not without recalling
some of the aspects of the MalkUt of the Ishraqi philosophers and of the “barzakh” (“intermediary”
world identified with the world of images) of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i.

The MalkUt of the Kabbalah possesses certain attributes of the “World of images” of Ghazali. The
Zohar considers the material world as a world of exile aspiring to receive the light of the world
above and to unite itself with the superior realities as the Wife aspires that the Husband place the
crown upon her brow. This encounter between the world below and the spiritual light from above

constitutes the “completion of the world” which is the manifestation of the “En Sof” and of the first
“sefira,” “Keter” (crown), for finally it is only through this world that the unmanifest and the hidden
can manifest itself. Goetschel writes: “it is from the splendour of the luminaries which are superior to
it and which are the perfection of the world above that were created the realities in their image
below MalkUt, which are their chariots, its palaces and its ornaments”155.

We see appear here the difference, in truth secondary, between the MalkUt of Kabbalah and the
World of images. The world of images of the Suhrawardi tradition is the world of archetypes that
are reflected in the world of sensible realities. In the Kabbalah, the world of the archetypes and of
the intelligible realities is placed above MalkUt which serves as an intermediary world, as “barzakh” of
the Ishraqi and Shaykhi tradition. The images of the Lights of the superior worlds descend into
MalkUt in order to incarnate themselves then into the sensible world. If the role of MalkUt is
conceived differently from that of MalakUt, the superior realities create therein a world of images in
imitation of Muslim thought.

The MalkUt of the Kabbalah is also a sphere of “recapitulation”. All the “sefirot” have as vocation to
unite themselves, directly or indirectly, with MalkUt. MalkUt is the sphere of the white light, for the
white light is the union of these lights of all the other colors.

Goetschel writes:

“Thus MalkUt defines herself as the universal receptacle susceptible to receive all the colors
and all the superior visions, thus as a sort of analogoon of the first matter of the philosophers,
which she could do only if she possessed an appropriate color. MalkUt defines herself thus as
this midda composed of all the sefirots, and which constitute a general force (koah kelali) in
relation to all the entities. Every sefira is married and in relationship with her...Otherwise
said, MalkUt is not only the place where all the sefirots unite but that by which they carry out
this operation.”156
Ibid., p. 82.
Ibid., p. 97. We have conserved the feminine for MalkUt.

All the Jewish reflection upon the intermediary function of MalkUt will conduct to enlarge the meaning and underline the importance of this inter-world, and will end finally with bringing it closer to MalakUt such as the Muslim tradition has made it known.

This was not the least of the surprises which were attested in the course of our study of the convergences between the Spanish or Langedoc Kabbalah of the Middle Ages with the thought of numerous Iranian philosophers. Without doubt this is once more a case of one of these mysterious phenomena of convergence which one encounters often in the history of human thought; convergence which always leads to Baha'u'llah, the blessed Beauty who incarnates in himself the glory (Kavod; Baha') and the beauty (Tiferet; Jamal) and who manifests the Shekhina-Sakina to the world.

The essential problem that Kabbalah posed is found in the question of knowing how MalkUt could be in contact with the sensible reality without being degraded itself, and how it was possible not to render MalkUt responsible for the evil which reigns upon the earth? Goetschel replies to this question in writing: "The diminution of MalkUt is justified by the necessity of giving autonomy to the sphere of rigour symbolized by Elohim. This autonomy is itself posed as a condition of possibility of the emergence and the existence of especially just inferior beings capable of operating the necessary acts in view of relieving MalkUt from decadence"157. But this decadence is but apparent. Ibn Gabbai says that it is as if one were to condemn the mother for the sins of her son. This does not at all imply that MalkUt is not part of the world of emanation (atsilUt) and that it does not receive on its part from the light from on high or be part of the "domain of the uniqueness" (reshUt ha-Yahid).
Nevertheless, MalkUt is not only a frontier sphere with the world below and the world above. There is visibly a reciprocal influence, because it is the actions of the just which contribute to the maintenance of MalkUt. This is not without recalling certain Shi'i and more particularly Shaykhi doctrines. Not only do the "sefirot" present resemblances with the pleroma

of fourteen immaculates,
but Shaykh Ahmad and especially Siyyid Kazim insisted upon the fact that at every moment there
must exist in the world a perfect believer who assures the junction between this world below and the
spiritual world, so that the order of the world be preserved. This doctrine of the perfect believer is
certainly a development of the Sufi doctrine of the “pole” (qutb), who is the Master par excellence
instructed in the secrets of gnosis such that there exists but one in [every] generation. In certain
schools, the perfect master is himself at the head of a spiritual hierarchy, the “nujabA” (les noble ones)
and the “nuqaba” (the close ones), who are the guardians of the esoteric sciences, and who at the
same time assure the order of the world, for without their existence, permitting the interpenetration
of MalakUt in the sensible world, the world could not exist. In this way the “nuqaba” and the “nujaba”
become the channels by which the sensible world is irrigated by the light of MalakUt. As we see it, we
are not far from the thesis of Ibn Gabbai. Finally, having once posed the idea that the junction
between the spiritual worlds and the sensible world is necessary, the most simple fashion of resolving
this problem is to imagine that there exist men who belong at the same time to the spiritual world
and to the sensible world and who establish the communication between the two. One can say that
all philosophy of Neoplatonic inspiration arrives almost by necessity to pose this kind of problem.
From the moment in which one installs a bipolarization of the spiritual cosmos apportioned between
an intelligible world (spiritual) and a sensible world, unfailingly the question of the relations between
the two is posed. In admitting a decadence of the sensible world, considered as the world of
imperfection and the source of evil, Kabbalistic thought is closer to Plotinus' thought and to the
Gnosis of the first centuries. Muslim philosophy managed to avoid this danger. We will see later on
Ibid., p. 181.

how Baha’u’llah resolves this problem. The construction of this same scheme shows that it is
necessary to manage a transition between the intelligible world and the

sensible world, from when
the concept of an intermediary world or sphere: the world of ideas of Plato.

5. Leibniz and MalkUt

One could believe that the concept of MalkUt has remained foreign to Western culture. Thanks to
Kabbalah this is not the case. The concept enters into contact with European thought by the
intermediary of the Platonic School of Florence, the members of which had an avid interest in the
Kabbalah. This explains why we find references to MalkUt (at the time spelled Malcuth) in at least
three places in the work of Leibniz.

Leibniz had an early interest in alchemical and Kabbalistic questions. From 1688 he was linked in
friendship with the Baron Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, the celebrated kabbalist and
theosophist158. Circa 1706 Leibniz became more closely interested in the Kabbalah due to a book of
Johan Georg Wachter, entitled “Elucidarius Cabalisticus seu de Recondita Hebraerum philosophia”
in which he affirms the accord of Spinoza and the Kabbalah. Leibniz read the book with attention
and even wrote “anima-adversiones”, that is to say notes in the form of a commentary which were
later published by Foucher de Careil under the title “Refutation inedite de Spinoza par Leibniz”159.
It is from this time that Leibniz was interested in Malkuth160. In his commentary, Leibniz is closely
interested in the sin of Adam and the interpretation thereof by the Fathers of the Church, as well as
in the procession of the Verb. Among the points discussed by Wachter and commented upon by
Leibniz is found the question of whether the Kabbalah recognizes the Trinity, notably through the
“Sefirot” of the kabbalistic Tree and the “En Sof”161. According to the interpretation of the Kabbalah
by Wachter, the true sin of Adam was a sin towards Malkuth. In seeking other attributes through the
secondary “sefirot” and in neglecting Malkuth, representing the summit of the Tree of the “sefirot” and
thus the Omniscience of God, Adam did not understand that God governs irresistibly, and he
thought to claim presumptuously a liberty which, in reality, was totally illusory because nothing
escapes the divine power162. We will not enter into all the details of the

reflections of Leibniz
concerning Malkuth. This subject only has an anecdotal interest for us.
However, the question
certainly assumed a very great importance for Leibniz, for he found therein all
sorts of
correspondences for his own conception of human liberty, and the subject would
reappear in two of
his major works, the “Political Treatise” and the “Ethics”.

G. Friedmann, “Leibniz et Spinoza,” Paris, 1975, p. 205.
Foucher de Careil, “Refutation inedite de Spinoza par Leibniz,” Paris,
1854, reproduced later by the same
author in his book “Leibniz, Descartes et Spinoza,” Paris, 1862. The exact
title of the treatise of Leibniz
rediscovered by Foucher in the Libary of Hanover is “Animadversiones ad Joh.
Georg. Watcheri librum de
recondita Hebraerun philosophia.”
G. Friedmann, op. cit., p. 201.
Ibid., p. 210.
Ibid., p. 211. Friedmann does not seem to have understood very well the
question, because of an
insufficient knowledge of the Kabbalah. The interpretation which we
reconstitute here is thus lightly
different from his own.

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In the “Political Treatise” he writes: “But most believe that the
ignorant trouble the order of nature
rather because they do not follow it and they conceive men in nature as an
empire within an empire
(imperium in imperio)”163. Leibniz means to say that men arrogate to
themselves the functions of
Malcouth as imperium, that is to say as Kingdom and as sovereignty. The idea
must certainly have
stuck with him, for one finds it again in a practically identical form in the
“Ethics” where he writes:
“Most of those who have written upon the affects and the principles of
conduct seem to treat not of
natural things which follow the general laws of Nature, but of things which are
outside of this
Nature. It seems even that they conceive man as an empire in an empire.”164
It is certain that if one
does not know that here the word imperium translates the Hebrew MalkUt and what
this concept
signifies in the Kabbalah, then the remark of Leibniz must appear particularly
obscure, and one
would ask oneself truly if it could hope to be understood. We will not seek to

enter more deeply into
the arcanities of Leibnizian thought. Beyond the anecdote, our purpose was simply to show what
power of fascination the idea of this MalkUtian Kingdom could have upon the intellectual history of
humanity in order to know such a diffusion. It is probable that if we push further our investigations,
we will find references to the MalkUt of the Kabbalah in the most unexpected authors.

CHAPTER FOUR:
THE DIVINE WORLDS IN THE TRADITION OF ISLAM

To retrace the history of MalakUt and of the system of the five divine worlds in Muslim tradition
represents an enormous task which must be undertaken on day. It will require without doubt
numerous years of research inasmuch as the sources are abundant and the problems which it
encounters arduous. Our aim here is only to explain why and how Baha'u'llah sheltered this
heritage.

To begin with, we must be skeptical of the remarks in the Arabic encyclopedias—sometimes copied
without critical spirit by certain Orientalists—as well as the later mystical treatises by Muslim
authors, which consider the theory of the five worlds (or presences: hadrAt) as a dogma or as
something that is evident and has always existed. On the contrary, it is the product of a very long
process of evolution through successive phases, the origins of which will doubtlessly remain forever
obscure. Only later on in this process were the five worlds given the significance that is associated
with them today by all the glosographs.

We must ask ourselves what was the purpose of Baha'u'llah when, in the "Tablet of All Food" he
employed this cosmology of the five worlds. His intention was perhaps to humor the mystical
penchant of Kamalu'd-Din by evoking esoteric questions which were bound to fascinate him.
However, that is not the question, for if Baha'u'llah retrieves old materials in this way, it is in order
to completely transform them. Even while his description of the divine worlds follows, in its great

Leibniz, "Traite politique," Bibliothèque des textes philosophiques,

texte, trad. et notes par S. Zac, Paris,
1968, pp. 40-41.
Leibniz, “L'Ethique,” trad. R. Misrahi, Paris, 1990, p. 155.

themes, that of the later Muslim tradition such as we find it in the last generations of Ishraqi thinkers and in Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i, it is with important modifications. Nevertheless, that is not the issue, for what is important here is the role which Baha’u’llah has this mystical cosmology play in his metaphysic and in his hermeneutic. We will see in the following chapters that this question cannot be fully appreciated except after we will have considered the relationship which Baha’i thought has with Neoplatonism, permitting us thereby to identify on the one hand the elements common to both systems and on the other hand their sometimes profound differences.

This work cannot be undertaken without a prefatory knowledge of the evolution of mystical cosmology in Islam generally and of the theory of the five presences in particular. As we are not able to explain this question in a comprehensive fashion, for the reasons earlier cited, we have contented ourselves with proceeding with some soundings in the history of Muslim mysticism and to suggest some future directions for research. We will begin by returning to the lexicographical origins of the nomenclature of the divine worlds.

1. The lexicographical origins of Hahut, Lahut and Nasut

We have noted the Aramaic origin of MalakUt and JabarUt, and no doubt it would appear logical to posit the same origin for Hahut, Lahut and Nasut. However, nothing is less certain. One can relate LAhUt to the Aramaic-Hebraic ElahUt which signifies “divinity”. But to explain HAhUt from an Aramaic etymology is more difficult. One can imagine that the radical HAh- could come from the root HYH which signifies “being” and which one finds in the tetragrammaton YHWH, the name of God. But NAsUt resists every attempt at explanation of this kind, for one finds no Hebrew [translator's question for author: Aramaic?] root to explain it. Furthermore, one must state that one does not find any attestation of these three words (Hahut, Lahut and Nasut) in

Hebraic or Aramaic
literature in a form permitting their passage into Syriac or into Arabic. In order to imagine that
these words could have passed thus from Aramaic to Arabic, one would have to admit that they are
evidence of an oral tradition that has left no traces.

The words LAhUt and NAsUt, according to certain philologists, came from Syriac, which is an
intermediary language between Aramaic and Arabic. The Syriac language was in its time the carrier
of a great culture and played a significant role in the development of Oriental Christianity.
Furthermore, a substantial part of Greek philosophy was transmitted to the Muslim world through
the intermediation of Syriac translations carried out by Christian monks. The utilization which we
know of LAhUt and NAsUt in Syriac refers to the theological definition of the double nature, divine
and human, of Jesus Christ. Lahut serves to describe the divine nature of Jesus Christ and Nasut his
humanity. This usage was also transmitted to Arab monophysitism which, in the same context,
forged the adjectives LAhUtI and NAsUtI.

However, even in Syriac, the terms have an Aramaic allure, which permits one to think that the
Syriac could have served as the intermediary between an Aramaic origin and the Arabic result. If
this thesis elegantly explains the transmission from Aramaic elAhUt to Syriac alOhUt or elOhUt and
then lAhUt in Arabic, it poses a problem for the word Nasut. Without any similar form appearing in
Aramaic, one does not find any attestation of Nasut in this linguistic heritage, although Syriac
possesses the word noshUt from which Nasut could conceivably derive. The Syriac term also appears
in the form nOshO which designates “man” in the general sense and which has the same etymology

as the Arabic nAs. The problem is heightened when we discover that notwithstanding the similarity
of their forms, what we know of the phonological evolution of Syriac does not permit us to relate
noshUtO and nOshO to a common form. It is thus probable that one of the two terms was borrowed
from a closely related Semitic language, most likely from Aramaic. However we

must be prudent for
an identical problem exists in Arabic in which we find that the trilateral root ANS gives the word
insAn (man in a general sense, humanity) and the root NAS gives the word nAs (man in the collective
sense of a group of men). NashUtO as the initial silent Alif indicates, must have been formed from the
same root as insAn, without our being able to explain the addition of an Aramaic suffix beyond pure
conjectures upon the possible borrowings or the variances of dialect.

The Aramaic forms of alOhUtO and nashUtO indicate that these words were used among the learned
and thus would have appeared among the clerics. We find their traces for the first time in a text
dated to the 4th century from the pen of Aphraatexii, who employs the expressions shem alOhUtO
(name of the divinity) and shem malkUtO165. Of course, the discovery here of alOhUtO in association
with malkUtO seems to prefigure the elaborations of the Muslim mystics upon the divine worlds and
specifically recalls the usages found in al-Makki and al-Ghazali.
Unfortunately, this is nothing more
than a simple presumption and it may be that the relationship between the two is purely fortuitous.
Elsewhere, one finds the employment of the word nOshO with regard to the humanity of Christ in
the 15th sermon of the “Liber Graduum”166. As is evident, these testimonies are, from a philological
point of view, extremely fragile, but this fragility may be explained by the rarity of Syriac sources in
general. Otherwise, the written sources may be out of sync with the oral usage of the time. We have
thus theorized that it was Arab Christians who assured the transmission of this terminology from
Syriac into Arabic. It is clear furthermore that these terms were particularly apt for articulating the
double nature of Christ and one senses the possibility of a distant Nestorian influence. However, it is
also possible that the lexicographical development of these terms in a Muslim context reciprocally
influenced the usage of the Christian Arabs.

These problems, which we will speak of again with regard to al-Hallaj, place in evidence the fact
that the circulation of ideas was considerably favored by the very great proximity of the Semitic
languages, the vocabulary of which reposes in its essentials upon common roots

for which only
vocalization changes. It is also this characteristic which explains, to the degree to which the Jewish
people were, with the Phoenicians, Semitic peoples who sustained highly advanced cultures, the very
great influence, particularly from a theological point of view, of Hebrew upon Quranic Arabic and
thereafter upon the language of the Muslim clerics.

The adoption of the words Lahut and Nasut into Arabic was greatly favored by the proximity of these
words to Arabic roots, with Syriac being much closer to Arabic than either Hebrew or Aramaic. In
the word Lahut we find the root LAH which gave “AllAh” in Arabic, and later the adjective “ilAhI”.
In the word NAsUt we find the word “nAs” which is frequent in the Qur'an and which signifies “the
people” in a collective sense, a group of men, and can serve to designate the entire collective entity
of humanity. The Aramaic consonance of Lahut and Nasut will itself suggest and favor the lexical
relation of these terms with the couple Malakut-Jabarut.

“Patrologie Syriaque,” Paris 1894, tome I, col. 794.
“Patrologie Syriaque,” tome III, p. 379, “Liber Graduum,” sermon XV.

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The explanation of Hahut is more complex and does not go in the same direction. We surmise,
following an established tradition in doing so, that the word is deconstructed into “hA-h-Ut” and that
“hA” comes from the Arabic “huwa”, meaning “he”, which is written “HW”; the “W” being a semi-
vowel susceptible of taking the form of whatever long vowel whether “A, U, I”; the second “H”
would not have been added except in homophony with Lahut. When one is familiar with the
reticence of the Arabophones to introduce any parasitical letter into the development of roots, one
may suspect that such a manipulation could not but be the work of Persian ears and one can be
almost positive that this development could not have taken place except in Persia.

The explanation which we have just mentioned for the etymology of Hahut is that which is
recognized by all the Arab and Persian commentators, notwithstanding that it is not without

problems at the linguistic level. We know that, in the mystical tradition, to qualify God in saying simply of Him “He is”—which in absence of a verb “to be” in Arabic brings one to “huwa” or to “huwa huwa” (He is He)—without ascribing to the divine essence any attribute, constitutes the most pure affirmation of the divine unicity (tawhId). Hahut is thus a term designed to qualify the divine essence in the state in which its attributes are potential and not manifested. The extremely sophisticated character of this concept indicates further that the term it conceals could not have been forged except in the course of extended philosophical reflection, and thus must be considered very late in provenance.

2. The couple Lahut-Nasut in al-Hallaj

If we admit that Hahut, Lahut and Nasut were formed in the image of Malakut and Jabarut at a later epoch, one must be able to explain with what purpose and how these words were associated from the start. But the question appears to be very complex in the absence of an exhaustive inventory of the sources and thus we are left with conjectures. From a preliminary investigation, it appears that Hahut must be set aside because of its very late appearance. It is then apparent that the four remaining terms function in pairs. We have on the one hand the pair Malakut-Jabarut which belongs to the literature of Quranic commentary, and we have the second pair composed of Nasut-Lahut which belongs to the mystical literature and which was to rapidly acquire a considerably extended usage, much more widely known that the first pair.

Numerous authors prior to the 10th century utilize Nasut in the sense of the human nature and Lahut in the sense of the divine world, opposing one to the other. Among these same authors we do not find references either to Malakut or to Jabarut. It is the case for example of Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922) for whom Lahut designates the sphere of the divine essence in opposition to the sphere of the human nature. Lahut and Nasut also represent for him two aspects of the human soul, aspects which are especially in evidence in the soul of the Prophet, who represents the Perfect Man, a lineage

which recalls Aphraate. Lahut and Nasut thus represent a universal bipolarity. Their opposition will become as fundamental to Muslim thought as the opposition between Nature and Culture in Western thought. To this we must add that, while al-Hallaj is familiar with Malakut, he does not use it except in its most narrow Quranic sense of divine sovereignty. Never does the term Malakut assume for him an ontological or metaphysical dimension. For him it is above all a divine attribute.

As for the term Jabarut, it seems to have been simply unknown to al-Hallaj. That which we have established for al-Hallaj can be considered as true for all the Muslim authors until the end of the 10th century, and even for a large part of the 11th century.

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What appears most curious about this lexicographical evolution over the course of the three first centuries of Islam, is that the couple Lahut-Nasut was formed long before the couple Malakut-Jabarut. This considerably weakens the linguistic hypothesis often put forward which indicates that Lahut and Nasut were formed in imitation of the word Malakut, by a sort of alliteration.

We have already made reference to the Syriac Christian influence as a plausible explanation for this usage. This explanation seems to adapt itself well to what we know about the formation of the metaphysical conceptions of al-Hallaj and appears to play an important role in the evolution of all later Sufism. This metaphysical stance insists that the union of man and God is not possible unless man possesses something divine within himself. Man, by seeking the annihilation of his own “me”, strives to fill himself with God, to the point of confusing himself with Him; from whence the famous exclamation of al-Hallaj, “Anna’l-haqq!”, “I am God”, a statement which led him to the gallows. It seems altogether possible that in order to describe this process of divinization, the community of al-Hallaj in Syria had recourse to a Christian terminology that was already being used to describe the double nature of Christ.

The possibility of their being a Christian influence upon the thought of al-Hallaj has caused much ink to flow, because every linking of this kind, especially if it emanates from

Western Orientalists
who, like Louis Massignon (1883-1962), have their own agenda, is susceptible of interpretations
which can be suspected of being inspired by religious prejudice. We think that this is not the
appropriate juncture to consider this theme in depth. Massignon at first adopted the explanation of
a Christian influence precisely through emphasizing the use by al-Hallaj of the couple Lahut-Nasut,
but later he rejected this association, probably based on philosophical rather than philological
reasons. He writes: “for him as for the ghulat, nasut, nur, sha’sha’ani and amr are synonymous167;
which has nothing Christian in it”168. Massignon then came to the conclusion that the antinomic
concepts of Lahut and Nasut were formed amongst the extremist Shi’is (Ghulat) which groups
developed gnostic tendencies that divinified the Imams and particularly ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib. Even if
this is an accurate attribution, one would have still to ask from whom, in the purely linguistic and
lexicographical plan, the Ghulat borrowed this vocabulary.

Al-Hallaj in any case had recourse to this vocabulary, whether he borrowed it from the Ghulat, or
from others including Christians, and whether or not this linguistic borrowing was characterized by
any theological contamination. It remains the case that if the adjective lahuti could serve to describe
the divine nature of Christ, it could also service to describe al-Hallaj’s divinization of man. Al-Hallaj
describes the process of this divinization in a text that is particularly interesting because of the usage
it makes of this vocabulary:

“I and “I”, and there is no other attribute. I am “I” and there is no other qualification. My
attributes, in effect (separated from my personality) have become a pure human nature
(nasutiyya); this humanity of mine is the annihilation of all the spiritual qualifications
(ruhaniyya) and my qualification is now a pure divine nature (lahutiyya).”169

“Nur” signifies “light”; “sha'sha'ani” [signifies] “burst of light”; and “amr” [signifies] “command”.
Massignon, “La passion de Hallaj,” Paris, 2e ed., tome III, p. 51.
Al-Hallaj, “Tanzih 'an al-na'at wa'l-wasf,” cited by Massignon, Ibid., tome III, p. 53.

When we examine this text, we perceive that the thought of al-Hallaj does not depart from the framework of Islamic orthodoxy, for it does not conceive the divinization of man in other terms than through his union with God. The union of man with God is not the union of man with the divine essence, but the union of man with his divine nature (lahutiyya).

It is curious that al-Hallaj frequently linked the world of Nasut to the world of the divine Imperative (amr), a concept which thereafter would become one of the attributes of Malakut, and especially of Jabarut after the essential contribution of Kamalu'd-Din 'Abdu'r-Razzaq Kashani (died 1329). For al-Hallaj, Lahut and Nasut express the double nature of man; but this double nature is of a spiritual character and not essential. We are far from the sensible-intelligible bipolarity that Muslim hristologic will introduce and in particular its most famous exponent, Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980-1037). For al-Hallaj, Nasut represents the irreducible essence of man once it is stripped of all its temporal and ephemeral "qualifications". From Nasut we pass to the concept of Nasutiyya which precisely describes this nature, that is at the same time spiritual and human and which, once stripped of its non-essential attributes, enters into a transformative union with God, thereby acquiring a divine nature (lahutiyya). Up to this point, al-Hallaj's position would probably not be disavowed by Baha'u'llah. The central thesis of Baha'i anthropology is precisely to affirm the spiritual nature of man, but we must not confuse this spiritual nature with the divine nature of the self preached by certain Sufis. In the mysticism of Baha'u'llah this spiritual nature of man forms "the divine trust"170, and its capacity is to be a mirror of divine grace and thereby to acquire divine qualities through stripping itself of the terrestrial part of the "me" constituted by man's animal heritage.

For al-Hallaj, union is effected through the "kun!", the creative word of God, the Biblical "fiat!" This creative word emanates from Lahut, the sphere of creative omnipotence.

Massignon writes:

“To give an acceptable theological formula of his expert mental gifts, al-Hallaj called upon all the technical resources of the contemporary lexicon. He borrowed in particular from the lexicon of the extremist Imami theologians the scale of their expressions designating the divine action, lahut, nasut, ruh, while considerably modifying their meanings. Lahut is the creative omnipotence; nasut is the divine commandment (amr), the essential word which unlatches the fiat! Kun! Of the divine creations, uncreated words of which the human language is the created image… It is no longer a series of emanations, but rather the revelation of a certain internal structure particular to the creative act of which the Qur’an enumerates in this way the stages: irada, takwin, ibda…”171

The thought of al-Hallaj is complex. It is probable that we will never completely unravel its sources and influences. We lack written traces and besides that, the entire environment of his times escapes us. The only thing that we can affirm with certitude is the etymological associations of the vocabulary. One cannot offhandedly reject the possibility of a Christian influence. Roger Arnaldez,

English: GL, ?, p. ?; French: EEB, ?, p. 63.
Massignon, op. cit., tome III, p. 51. “Irada” signifies “will”; “takwin” designates the creative act; and “ibda” signifies creation. We will have occasion to return to these terms in the following Chapters.

who defends this thesis172, depends upon Muslim authors such as ‘Afifi in his great work upon Sufism173 and al-Shibli174 to demonstrate the possibility of a Nestorian influence. He writes: “We can in effect consider the Nasut of al-Hallaj as the equivalent of the prosópon of union in which is united the will of God and the will of man”175. The lexical and semantic evolution of these ideas must have been long and complex; for before a term enters into the written language, it generally passes through a phase of acclimatization in the oral language, and when al-Hallaj employs the words Lahut and Nasut, he does so as if these terms were already known to the public in the

framework of the definitions he gives them. In fact, one cannot exclude a superposition of multiple influences which might have included Judaic elements, notably in the Aramaic elahUt, and Christian elements resulting from the hristological controversies of the epoch. Nevertheless, numerous indications suggest that the Hebraic-Aramaic substratus was not entirely lost and permitted suggestive relationships.

3. The metaphysical system of Al-Makki

From the 11th century onwards, the meaning of the word Malakut began to evolve and to acquire a semantic content that is differentiated from its Quranic usage. We find evidence of this development in Ibn Sina, for whom Jabarut clearly becomes the world of the celestial souls and Malakut the world of the Intelligent Agents in the philosophical system he was developing which was strongly impregnated with Neoplatonism. However the Avicennian system is not an ontological scheme in the sense in which it was to be elaborated subsequently, and we are well aware that Quranic or pseudo-Quranic terms were here employed in a scheme which was purely Hellenistic in spirit.

If we consider the greater part of the Arabic sources, the true founder of the first onto-cosmological system of the divine worlds would be Abu-Talib al-Makki (d. 996) who set forth his theory in “The Food of the Hearts” (Qut al-Qulub). This system became the basis of that articulated by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), and al-Ghazali himself says that he borrowed it from al-Makki and it is to him that he attributes its paternity. This statement of al-Ghazali certainly establishes a strong presumption, but it is also possible that this system was engendered in the environment in which al-Makki frequented and that his contribution was only to express it in writing, or that he did no more than amplify already existing ideas.

Al-Makki identifies Mulk (we will say Nasut) with the exoteric (zahir) physical world, and Malakut with the hidden and invisible (batin, that is to say esoteric) world, indicating that the latter can not be perceived except subsequent to an interior illumination of which the heart serves as location. The

heart itself represents the esoteric and invisible dimension of man and the instrument of mystical
knowledge. The heart is thus the door of Malakut, or the seat of the spiritual realities in man himself.

4. The divine worlds in the work of al-Ghazali

R. Arnaldez, article “Lahut-Nasut,” in Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd edition.
'Afifi, “Al-tasawwuf: al-thawra al-ruhiyya fi'l-Islam,” Alexandria, [Egypt], 1963, pp. 82-83.
Kamil Mustafa al-Shibli, “Shahr Diwan al-Hallaj”.
R. Arnaldez, op. cit., p. 617.

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The great promoter of the first onto-cosmological theory of the divine worlds is incontestably al-
Ghazali, and we can be sure that without his work an onto-cosmological theory would not have
taken form, at least in reference to the lexicographical elements which interest us. This is why we
have difficulty following Henri Corbin (1903-1978) who, in his “Histoire de la Philosophie
Islamique”, presents al-Ghazali as a marginal thinker and without influence upon the evolution of
Islamic philosophy, the importance of whom the Occident has exaggerated, principally because of
the influence al-Ghazali undoubtedly had upon Western philosophy in the Middle Ages176.
Contrary to Corbin's contention, al-Ghazali's philosophical contributions influenced generations of
thinkers, and indeed constituted the common patrimony of the Arab and Persian mystics beginning
when they separated themselves from the philosophy of Kalam. Without al-Ghazali, Shihab al-Din
Yahya al-Suhrawardi (1154-1191) could not have formulated his doctrine and the School of Isfahan
would not have seen the light of day.

The system of al-Ghazali is a system of three degrees — the world of Mulk, the world of Jabarut and
the world of Malakut. It is not difficult to see that in this form he reproduces the three hypostases of
the “Theology of Pseudo-Aristotle” — the world of Nature (tabi'a), the world of the soul (nafs) and
the world of the Spirit or Intelligence ('aql).

The world of Mulk is at the same time the physical world, the world of the creature (khalq) and the
world of that which is manifest (shahada). In relation to Aristotelian thought,

it is the “world of
generation and corruption” ('alam al-kawn wa'l-fisad).

The world of Jabarut is for al-Ghazali the world of the invisible (ghayb). It manifests attributes which
in the case of later authors will become those of Malakut while always remaining distinct from that
world, without doubt due to the scheme of Hellenistic inspiration which it adopts. It is in Jabarut that
he situates the sensible and imaginative faculties of the human soul. In this regard, it is interesting to
note that the onto-cosmological scheme of al-Ghazali seeks less than explain how it is possible to
pass from a first divine emanation to the different spheres of being, and thus to the physical world,
than to determine the functions of the soul in relation to a reality with multiple dimensions
corresponding to the different types of knowledge of man.

Finally, for al-Ghazali, Malakut is the world of Intelligence. It is a supra-sensible world directly
opposed to the world of Mulk. It is also the world of the angelic entities. Malakut thus includes within
itself a spiritual hierarchy which, first of all, is composed of the spiritual creatures which populate it,
and, secondarily, corresponds to the different degrees of elevation of the human soul. As the world
of Intelligence, Malakut contains all the intelligible realities, whereas the sensible world (Mulk)
constitutes the reflection of the intelligible realities, and hence Malakut is similar to the world of
Platonic ideas or of Aristotelian forms.

The system of al-Ghazali is not without ambiguities, for it hesitates between adopting a dualist vision
of the world that would oppose the sensible world to the intelligible world, and affirming a vision
closer to Plotinian Neoplatonism based upon a hierarchy with three degrees of hypostases.
Nevertheless there exists an important difference between the system of al-Ghazali and that of
Plotinus (204-270) — for al-Ghazali the three degrees of reality are directly willed into being by God
Who remains exterior to the system. In his system, one cannot say of Malakut or of Jabarut that one
Henri Corbin, “Histoire de la philosophie islamique,” 1964, pp. 253, 259.

leads to the other or that there exists a relationship of causality between them. Hence al-Ghazali saw very well that a system of hypostases in which one was engendered by the other was incompatible with the fundamentals of Islam. (We will find a similar critique of Plotinian Neoplatonism in the "Tafsir" of 'Abdu'l-Baha.) This conviction leads al-Ghazali to split the functions of the suprasensible world between two worlds, and to make of Jabarut an intermediary world between the sensible world and the world of intelligible realities, and calls this latter world Malakut. The Jabarut of Ghazali is located in the same onto-cosmological position as the Imaginal World in the later systems of the Islamic mystics and philosophers. It is the later authors who tend towards gnosticism and pantheism, and in particular the Sufis and other adepts of existential monism (wah.dat al-wujuud), who will situate Jabarut above Malakut in order to give this onto-cosmological scheme the allure with which it is associated in the Islamic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries. Seeking to delineate the function of Jabarut, al-Ghazali writes:

"The negation which you oppose to the world of Malakut is analogous to that which the sumaniyya (atheists) oppose to that of sovereignty (Jabarut). They have limited consciousness to the findings of the five senses; they have thus negated the existence of power, of will and of knowledge"177

Elsewhere, he adds this commentary:

"The limits of the world of sovereignty (Jabarut) are found between two worlds in such fashion that it seems to be part of the world of the reign (Mulk); also it has been regarded as part of the eternal power in the world of the Kingdom (Malakut)."178

The "Treatise of the Tabernacle of Lights" (Mishkat al-Anwar), representing without doubt a less advanced stage in the thought of al-Ghazali, gives more evidence of the sensible-intelligible duality, however it still indicates that the assimilation of Malakut to the world of Platonic ideas and to the Imaginal World is already clearly realized. Al-Ghazali writes:

"Know that the world is double: a spiritual world and a corporeal world or,

if you prefer,
intelligible and sensible, or rather superior and inferior. All these
expressions are about
equivalent...Often also one is called world of the divine sovereignty (Mulk),
and of the visible,
and the other the world of the invisible (ghayb) and of the celestial kingdom
(Malakut)...But the
sensible world is a point of application in order to elevate oneself towards
the intelligible
world. If between the two there were no links and correspondences, the rising
path would be
closed. And if that were not possible, it would thus be impossible to approach
the presence of
the Lord and to become closer to God...The divine mercy has caused there to be
a
homologic relation between the visible world (Mulk) and that of the celestial
kingdom
(Malakut). Consequently, there is nothing in the first which is not a symbol
(mithal; that is to
say an archetypal image) of something in the second. It could be that one and
the same thing
is the symbol of several things in the world of Malakut, and inversely a single
thing of Malakut
can be represented by several things in the visible world. One thing is the
symbol of another
if it represents that other by virtue of a certain similitude and if it
corresponds to it by virtue

Al-Ghazali, “Ihya,” IV. 218.
Ibid., I.168.

of a certain correlation. To enumerate these symbols would require the
exhaustive study of
all the beings found in the two worlds; the forces of man would not suffice for
this...”179

Al-Ghazali is, after al-Makki, the first to set forth an onto-cosmological (or
cosmo-ontological, it is a
question of nuance) system of the worlds of God. For the first time, this
theory is articulated with a
certain coherency; yet without always clearly resolving all the problems which
it poses. One of these
problems resides in the concept of an intercourse between the two worlds,
sensible and intelligible.
Many authors were tempted to imagine an intermediary world between these two,
and for certain
among them this would be “the Imaginal World” ('alam al-mithal), while for

others it would be, as we will see with the Shaykhi School, the “world of Huqalya”. Al-Ghazali also seems to have been the first thinker to link the problem of the world of the Platonic ideas to the Aramaic-Arab lexicon of the divine worlds. It is for this reason that he and al-Makki should be regarded as the fathers of all the later developments of this theory.

Was this an original theory? It seems very probable that this idea was already in formation in the Muslim world and that al-Makki and al-Ghazali did but formalize and clarify the ideas already in circulation. The text cited above shows without doubt that the passage of the double polarity Malakut-Jabarut and Nasut-Lahut to a system with three degrees was already operating. This could not have happened without the influence of the famous “Theology of Aristotle” and other Neoplatonic texts. It is thus that the environment in which these texts were accessible that research into the origins of these ideas should be pursued.

5. The contribution of al-Suhrawardi

After al-Ghazali, the next important step in our study is to consider the work of al-Suhrawardi (Shaykh Ishraq). This might be considered to be paradoxical inasmuch as the theoretical contribution of al-Suhrawardi to the concept of the five worlds is quite marginal, and represents somewhat of a retreat in comparison to Ghazali. But al-Suhrawardi was not a theoretical philosopher but rather a great mystic, and so his contribution is thus situated in another domain.

One could say that the entire work of al-Suhrawardi is an effort to synthesize philosophy and mysticism, and to generate a synthesis in which the mystical experience dominates. When he explains his project, al-Suhrawardi declares himself convinced that the philosophers of ancient Greece, the Magi of Persia and the Prophets of the Sacred Books derived their inspiration from the same source, the famous “Niche of Lights” (Mishkat al-Anwar)180, and he therefore affirms that there is an accord and a hidden harmony between their doctrines181. Al-Suhrawardi attempted to give expression to his conviction by borrowing a portion of his terminology from the

philosophers as well
as using a mass of images, symbols and parables derived from the ancient reserves of the Zoroastrian
religion. But above all the work of al-Suhrawardi is that of a poet who derives his motive force from
the power of the symbols he manipulates and the collective archetypes he invokes, bringing thereby

Al-Ghazali, “Le Tabernacle des lumieres,” trad. Roger Deladriere, Paris, 1981, pp. 64-65.
Deladriere translates the expression “Mishkat al-anwar” by “Taberacle of lights” which is certainly more
elegant than “Niche of lights”; but in speech the word “Mishka” designates a place serving to lodge a lamp in
a wall.
We see here the great dependency of al-Suhrawardi upon al-Ghazali.

into a fusion the fundamental myths of humanity.

This quality of al-Suhrawardi's assured its success. It contributed to the establishment of a series of
literary and mystical themes that then became part of the collective patrimony of Persian culture,
and fixed a defined vocabulary which became that of most philosophy in Persia. These themes and
this vocabulary is part of the heritage of Baha’u’llah. He in fact deliberately foreswore the abstract
vocabulary of the Peripatetic philosophers and adopted the poetic vocabulary of the Ishraqiyyun
(followers of Shaykh Ishraq). However, one must not interpret the philosophy of Baha’u’llah in a
Suhrawardian manner. Baha’u’llah utilizes this vocabulary in a purely metaphorical fashion.
Notwithstanding this, Baha’is must recognize this heritage in Baha’u’llah's writings, and its lineage of
transmission ending in Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid Kazim – which began in al-Suhrawardi.

For the generations that would follow him, al-Suhrawardi became “the Guide of Malakut”. It was he
who sought to determine how the world of intelligible realities can encounter the sensible world and
how man can elevate himself from one world towards the other. However, if al-Suhrawardi wrote
abundantly about Malakut, we did not develop a global theory of the divine worlds. The reason for
this is doubtless because the work of Shaykh Ishraq was principally the product

of his intuition.
Questions in abstract metaphysics did not interest him at all. As for his metaphysics, the Shaykh on
the whole accepted the philosophy of Ibn Sina, with its procession of six Intelligences, probably
because this was the philosophy that was the most universally admitted in his time. Upon this, he
superimposed the theory of the divine worlds which existed at the time, that is to say limited to the
three worlds. One might think that it was in al-Makki that al-Suhrawardi discovered the articulation
of this theory, for he cites this author182. One thus finds in al-Suhrawardi on the one hand the
couple Lahut-Nasut employed in a way very similar to that of al-Hallaj, and on the other hand the
three divine worlds — Mulk, Jabarut and Malakut — in a formulation very close to that of al-Ghazali
which must derive from al-Makki, but which had been considerably enriched by the speculations of
the mystic environments in which this theory must have been very popular, for al-Suhrawardi
employs it as if it were well known to his public.

Regarding the first couple, Lahut-Nasut, al-Suhrawardi writes that the soul has torn itself from the
sensible world in order to rise to the heights of the mystical consciousness: “It passed through the
paths of the human condition (Nasut), and it attained to the habitation of the divine condition
(Lahut).”183

We see here that in a very classical manner Nasut and Lahut are contrasted; but nevertheless the
world of Lahut is not closed to the human soul and it is able to penetrate therein. This is one of the
rare examples in which the thought of the Shaykh was open to the possibility of a human
participation in the divine.

As for the three worlds also cited, al-Suhrawardi writes:

“According to the philosophers the universes are three in number: the world of the
Treatise of the tongue of the ants (Risalih-yi Lughat-i-muran), in “L'archange empourpre,” translated by
Henri Corbin, p. 422. We will abbreviate this reference henceforth by “Archange” followed by the page
number.
Epistle of the high towers (Risalatu'l-abraj) in “L'archange,” p. 350.

Intelligences, and that is the world of Jabarut; the world of Souls, and that is Malakut; the
world of Mulk, and that is the domain of material bodies."184

In "the Book of the Temples of Light" (Kitab Hayakil al-Nur), al-Suhrawardi tried to reconcile this
conception of the three divine worlds with the Neoplatonic philosophy of Ibn Sina. He wrote:

"Know that the divine worlds are three in number, according to the philosophers: "There is
a world which the philosophers call world of Intelligence ('alam al-'aql, the Neoplatonic
Nous). The word Intelligence in their lexical technique designates all substance (every
substantial being) that cannot be the object of an indication perceptible by the senses, and
which has not exercised action upon the body. There is the world of the Soul ('alam al-nafs).
While the thinking soul is neither a body nor corporeal, nor provided with a sensible spatial
dimension, it must exercise its action in the world of bodies. The thinking souls are
distributed among those who have to exercise their action in the sidereal regions (les Animae
caelestis motrices des spheres), and those who exercise their action for the human kind (les
Animae humanae). There is the world of the body ('alam al-jism) which is distributed into an
etheric world (athiri, the sidereal world) and the world of the elements ('unsuri)."185

In his "Book of the Verb of Sufism" (Kitab Kalimat al-Tasawuf), al-Suhrawardi draws closer links
between the two systems and gives a resume of the hierarchy of the worlds:

"There is the world of Intelligence ('aql) and it is Jabarut. There is the world of the Soul (nafs) and of
the Verb (Kalima) and it is the world of Malakut. There is the visible material world (Mulk), which
obeys the Soul, this one [obeys] Intelligence, this one [obeys] its principle (Mubdi')"186

There would be much to write in order to give a thorough exegesis of these citations, and this is
unfortunately impossible in the narrow framework which we have fixed for ourselves. However,
what is important here, is less the theory of the divine worlds than the

exploration of Malakut and
Jabarut in which the Shaykh was engaged, for al-Suhrawardi had difficulty distinguishing between
these two worlds. The only innovation which he seems to have introduced was in making Malakut
the domain of the soul and Jabarut the domain of Intelligence. Even this distinction is directly
derived from a Neoplatonic approach to the problem and represents nothing entirely original.
Malakut and Jabarut appear to the eyes of the soul, he says in the “Book of the Temples of Light”, like
twins187.

This confusion has no importance, for what interests al-Suhrawardi is not the ontological scheme,
but rather the development of a theory of visionary knowledge founded upon the Imaginal World.
This theory would become a classic, and even if it was left to the later philosophers to enrich and
develop it, all the credit returns to al-Suhrawardi.

It is not easy to determine if al-Suhrawardi places the Imaginal World ('alam al-mithal) in Malakut or

The symbol of the faith of the philosophers (Risalat fi i'tiqad al-hukama), in
“L'archange,” p. 22.
“L'archange,” pp. 51-52.
Ibid., p. 165.
Ibid., p. 63.

in Jabarut, or rather if this Imaginal World encompasses these two at the same time or if it is separate
from them. This question greatly troubled later commentators such as Ghiyathu'd-Din Shirazi, who,
commenting on one of the passages which we have cited, believes it necessary to explain that the
worlds are four in number, that so as to include the Imaginal World, for one must distinguish “the
world of Intelligences...the world of bodies which encompasses the spheres and the elements which
that which they include, the world of Souls...the Imaginal World ('alam al-mithal wa al'khayal)
designated as barzakh (the between-two, the inter-world) and that the philosophers also designate as
the world of appearing Forms (ashbah mujarrada), a world to which the ancient philosophers already
refer.”188

Authors argued about this for a long time, and the same questions rose again to the surface with
Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i, and discover him trying to determine where the Imaginal World is situated.
In our judgment, the problem is insoluble in the framework of Avicennian Neoplatonism, and even
in Platonism in a general sense, because of certain irreducible axioms from which this theory is
composed. We will ultimately discuss the manner in which Baha'u'llah resolves the problem, by
completely transforming the nature of the intelligible realities (haqa'iq). In fact, in al-Suhrawardi,
Malakut progressively absorbed the Imaginal World.

Malakut is the world of spiritual realities, and these realities are not abstract; rather they are angelic
realities which, reflecting themselves in the soul of the contemplative, determine a spiritual state
which results in a transubstantiation of his whole being and to an expansion of interior space in
which the imaginative faculty is deployed. In its capacity as interior space, Malakut is the domain of
the events of the soul, events which have nothing to do with the events of the world or of
consciousness. In its capacity as ontological sphere, Malakut is the domain of the universal Soul and
of the human soul that is related to it. The primordial question for al-Suhrawardi is thus not so
much to explain the relations of the sphere of Malakut with inferior or superior spheres, but rather to
find a practical way which would permit the human soul to elevate itself from the sensible world to
Malakut. This is possible through actualizing in the soul an angelic state (malakiyya) thereby
permitting it to have access to the contemplation of superior realities. The acquisition of this angelic
state is at the same time the result of a cultivated asceticism, and the fruit of a gnosis. This gnosis
results as much from a teaching as from a putting into practice a theory of the faculties of the soul,
the methods of their control and their deployment, and awareness of the different types and modes
of knowledge which are the fruits thereof.

The theory of the contemplative knowledge of al-Suhrawardi is founded upon five faculties of the
soul — the faculty of discernment (hiss-i-mushtarik), which certain ones referring to this old Christian

scholasticism call the sensorium; the representative imagination (khayal); the cogitative faculty
(fikriyya; mufakira); the estimative faculty189; [and the memory190].

Ibid., pp. 78-79.
The Book of the Temples of Light, in “L'archange,” p. 44
Translator’s Note: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá repeats this same set of powers of the soul in “Some Answered Questions”
(LVI, pp. 245-246): “ Man has likewise a number of spiritual powers: [2]the power of imagination, which
forms a mental image of things; [3]thought, which reflects upon the realities of things;
[4]comprehension, which understands these realities; [5]and memory, which retains whatever man has
imagined, thought, and understood. The intermediary between these five outward powers and the
inward powers is a [1]common faculty, a sense which mediates between them and which conveys to the

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The theory of the active Imagination goes back to Ibn Sina and has a complex family tree. Ibn Sina
based himself upon the “De Anima” of Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and upon the interpretation of
“Stragite” by Abu al-Nasr al-Farabi (870-950) in a Neoplatonic context which in its turn borrowed
from the “Theology of Pseudo-Aristotle” as well as from Porphyry (232/3-305) and from diverse
Neoplatonic authors for which Arabic translations began to become available at this epoch. Al-
Suhrawardi simplified this theory of the active Imagination and adapted it to his concepts of the
Imaginal World and Malakut. This Suhrawardian meeting between a metaphysical theory of the
divine worlds and a noetic theory of mystical intuition is fundamental for the subsequent
development of Persian philosophy. It opens the way to a hermeneutical interpretation of exegesis
and of theology, but at the same time it closes the way to the maintenance of a relationship of
complementarity between the physical and the metaphysical, between a mystical theosophy and a
true philosophy of nature. It is this last point that will be implicitly criticized by Baha’u’llah, as we
will see.

The discriminating faculty, or sensorium, is for al-Suhrawardi the faculty which establishes the

synthesis of the findings of the senses and which permits contemplation of the forms which one sees
in dreaming. It is the “synaisthesis” or the “aistherion koinion” of Greek philosophy of which Aristotle
tells us that is it an incorporeal sense which is the organ of the spiritual body191. The representative
imagination (khayal), adds al-Suhrawardi, is simply the theorization of the sensorium which is the
intellectual organ capable of saving the forms (suwar) after they have disappeared from the external
senses. The cogitative faculty is the active imagination that perceives the realities beyond all
solicitation of the external senses by the direct and intuitive contemplation of the realities of the
Imaginal World which projects its vision in the sensorium. The estimating faculty is the faculty of
pure imagination, which is controlled neither by the intellect, nor by the cogitative faculty. It is this
that eventually fails us, be it in negating the perception of the senses, be it in negating the perception
of the active imagination. Finally comes memory, which permits us to keep the souvenir both of
external and internal sensations.

We recognize that in this scheme the only thing which truly interests the Shaykh, is the active
imagination which gives access to the Imaginal World. Thereafter, al-Suhrawardi will demonstrate
the need of the seeker for truth to relieve himself of this encumbering apparatus and he will explain
that the estimating faculty, the active and the passive imagination, are one and the same thing. The
definition of the active imagination will open the way to the exploration of Malakut. It is the only
human attribute that will interest the philosophers of the Ishraqi School. It is upon this point that
there exists a fundamental divergence between the Ishraqiyyun and the Baha’is.

As we see it, al-Suhrawardi turned his back to pure metaphysical speculation about ontological

inward powers whatever the outward powers have perceived. It is termed the common faculty as it is
shared in common between the outward and inward powers.”
‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks in the same sense in “Some Answered Questions” (LVI, pp. 245-246) of the
“discriminating faculty” (hiss-i-mushtarik) which the translator has

rendered literally as “common faculty”.
The function of this is to establish the link between the perceptions of the senses and the intellectual faculties including the imaginative faculty. There is obviously a reconciliation to be made between the exposition of al-Suhrawardi and the Chapter of “Some Answered Questions” which is devoted to this question. Like Henri Corbin we prefer to revive the Aristotelian vocabulary which permits us to make the unknown known and shows that these developments are far from being foreign to the Western tradition.

questions, in order to transform the theory of the divine worlds into a psychological theory of knowledge. We find a certain echo of this method in the “Tablet of All Food” of Baha’u’llah when he declares that the word “food” has a meaning in relation to each of the divine worlds.

Al-Suhrawardi moves in the direction of simplification. One thing alone interests him — the perception of the Imaginal World. He did not preoccupy himself therefore with philosophical coherency and his doctrine is characterized in great part by imprecision, and sometimes by incoherency. But notwithstanding this it would know have an extraordinary success and for several reasons. The first is because Ithna 'Ashari (Twelver Imami) Shi'ism would make it theirs, for it facilitates the development of its metaphysic of the hidden Imam. The second reason is that it furnishes a theoretical framework for the lovers of mystical experiences. The third is that al-Suhrawardi develops a symbolic framework for the Imaginal World which served as a common reservoir for all Persian thinkers who come after him. We find numerous echoes of his symbolism in the work of Baha’u’llah. Al-Suhrawardi identified the Holy Spirit with the Tenth Intelligence of Ibn Sina or the angel Sorush of the Zend Avesta. He revived Zoroastrian angelology, making of Bahman (Avestan: Vohu Manah, one of the archangels Amahraspand) the angel of Jabarut and the first of the Intelligences. He described Malakut, as the “Na-koja-Abad”, the Land of Not-where, the “U-topos”. He symbolized the meeting of the soul with the spiritual

realities by the mountain of Qaf,
the point at which the soul can lose itself in contemplation, Qaf being identical in his concept to
Mount Sinai. He also made Malakut the fortified city of the soul (Shahristan), the oratory of the
personal angel. Meditation in Malakut confers the light of Glory, the "Khvarnah" the particular
charisma which the royal dignity conferred upon the just kings of ancient Persia.

Al-Suhrawardi establishes in this way a series of correspondences between themes from diverse
origins, Zoroastrian included, and the concepts of Muslim theology. This gives to his thought a great
spiritual openness and inclines it towards a certain universalism. The great philosophical project of
al-Suhrawardi was to unite the sciences of the Qur'an and its theology to the wisdom of ancient
Persia and to Greek philosophy. This great project remained the unrealized dream of all Persian
philosophy. Its realization was prevented by the irreducibility of certain fundamental concepts of
Islamic theology which lose all operational value when recast in the framework of Ibn Sina's
Neoplatonism. The assignment of a role to the Platonic Intelligences inevitably resulted in the ruin
of Islamic theology and the impossibility of constructing a theology of the divine Verb. It was
because he was conscious of this problem that al-Suhrawardi sought to interpret the hierarchy of
Intelligences in terms of the angelic hierarchy. His epoch was still too marked by the influence of al-
Farabi, Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali, for him to be able to divest himself of the prevailing Greco-Islamic
eclecticism so as to return either to true Platonism, or to true Aristotelianism, which would have
been the only way to resolve his dilemma. This critique does not detract at all from the value of his
philosophical project. It has taken a certain blindness on the part of Orientalists not to see that
Baha'u'llah is the only direct heir to this project. His theory of "progressive Revelation" furnishes
the only philosophical framework in which one can reinterpret the entirety of the message of
Zoroaster on the same footing as the teaching of the Qur'an. No Muslim would have dared to go so
far. From another angle, Baha'u'llah establishes the basis of a new

metaphysic which, while being a philosophy of emanation, and thus a philosophy grounded in a reinterpretation of Plato and Aristotle, is nonetheless a philosophy which has broken every link of dependency towards that Greek heritage. Indeed, Greek philosophy is assigned a new place in the panorama of human history and its value is thus clearly recognized. The Baha'i philosophical project goes even beyond this, for it aspires to effect the synthesis of all these wisdoms, and proclaims that all the virtualities of the

message of Baha'u'llah cannot be known until every people reinterprets its own tradition in the new light of this universal teaching, in order that each may then bring its contribution to the edification of a global civilization which is truly universal in its values.

6. Ibn al-'Arabi

If al-Suhrawardi is the Persian theoretician par excellence of the Imaginal World and of visionary knowledge, we must not forget that the theme had already been developed by Ibn Sina and by other Muslim thinkers. Al-Suhrawardi remains in the framework of "orthodox" thought, notwithstanding his condemnation to death by a college of jurists in Aleppo who branded him as a heretic for having affirmed that God can raise up a Prophet whensoever He wishes and by thereby calling into question the doctrine that Muhammad was the last of the divine messengers — a theme that is found at the heart of the message of the Bab. Other thinkers were not so "orthodox" as al-Suhrawardi, for they would adopt the theory of the Imaginal World to their pantheistic conceptions (wah.dat al-wujuud), and among these Muhyi'd-Din Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240) is the most eminent representative.xiii The movement of "wah.dat al-wujuud" is nevertheless important for it will nourish the speculations of the greater part of the Sufi schools.

Ibn al-'Arabi writes in his "Book of the Meccan Victories" (Al-Futuuh.aat al-Makkiyya) that the mystic, in order to arrive at the contemplation of intelligible realities, must retire from this world so as to remove from his soul the images of this sensible world, for the spiritual

images can not be reflected
above the images of the inferior worlds:

“Thus, the spiritual voyager aspires to retreat and to make mention (adhkar) of God through
the praise of him 'in the hands of whom is found sovereignty'. So, when the soul is found
purified and the veils of nature which interposed between it and the spiritual world (Malakut)
are lifted, all the sciences engraved in the forms of the world of worlds will come to be
reflected in the mirror of the soul.”192

Ibn al-'Arabi occupies a central place in the history of Muslim mysticism. From the very fact that he
was a mystic and not a philosopher, his doctrine is difficult to interpret, and one must always take
care to distinguish his teaching from the doctrines of those who refer to him. To attempt to go into
these problems more deeply, and notably those which his ontology poses, would sidetrack us
significantly, so we will content ourselves with a brief reference. The teaching of Ibn 'Arabi
impregnated a good part of Persian philosophy and contributed in a significant manner to the
formation of its vocabulary. The attitude of Baha’u’llah to this heritage is complex and merits being
studied closely. The vocabulary of Ibn 'Arabi certainly leaves a trace in the work of Baha’u’llah. This
was inevitable because Baha’u’llah was in contact with numerous Sufis who were inspired by the
teaching of Ibn 'Arabi and who posed numerous questions about this teaching to Baha’u’llah. We
recall that while Baha’u’llah was in retreat amongst the mountains near Sulaymaniyyih in
Kurdistan, he spent numerous weeks with a Sufi hermitage revealing a commentary upon the most
important work of Ibn 'Arabi, “The Meccan Victories”. Apparently, his interpretation pleased and
did not shock his audience. On the other hand, Baha’u’llah energetically condemned the
fundamental theses of existential monism in a number of his letter, including, with exquisite tact, in
Ibn 'Arabi, “Futuhat al-makkiya,” II, 48, 20; and II, 129, 19.

“The Seven Valleys” [Haft Vadi]. The relationship between the philosophy of Ibn 'Arabi and

development of that philosophy by subsequent writers is extremely complex, for one must take note
of numerous direct and indirect commentators, such as Mulla Sadra and Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i,
who sometimes diverge profoundly amongst themselves.

7. Jabarut as the world of decree

A century after Ibn al-'Arabi, Kamalu'd-Din 'Abdu'r-Razzaq al-Kashani, in his “Treatise on
Destiny” sought to comprehend the distinction between Jabarut and Malakut which had often been
blurred by earlier writers. He made of Jabarut the world of the divine decrees (qada) and the sphere in
which the creation is entirely determined by God. Jabarut is the world of pure spirit totally distinct
from Malakut which is the world of the soul. From the world of Jabarut emanates a compelling force
that governs creation. The Ishraqi philosophers were to assimilate this force to the “victorious lights”
(al-anwar al-qahira) which are the archangelic lights of al-Suhrawardi. From al-Kashani onwards a
new conceptualization was elaborated which returned to the ontological problems al-Suhrawardi
had abandoned.

Al-Jurjani (died 1413) made of Jabarut the world of the divine names and attributes, functions that
would later be transferred to Lahut. This transfer took place when Lahut ceased being identified as the
world of the pure essence upon the delegation of its characteristics to Hahut, thereby making Lahut
available to receive the divine attributes in their deployment from the essence.

It is interesting to note that the contribution of al-Kashani is an important link that leads to the
metaphysic of Baha’u’llah, who likewise represents Jabarut as the world of decree, and in an
imperative theology, describing every world as representative of a type of decree, occupies an
important place in the presentation of his metaphysic, as we will see in the following chapter.

8. Malakut as angelic world

Another modification in the system of the divine worlds which was produced in this epoch was the
progressive transformation of Malakut, from a world of the spirit (ruh), to a world of the

contemplative soul, to a world of angels arbitrating the spiritual pleroma of the hierarchy of spiritual creatures and finally even to a world of the souls of the just. The conceptualization of Malakut as an angelic world was without doubt produced because of a new understanding of the origin of the word once the awareness of its Aramaic origin had been lost. We have already found numerous traces of this new understanding in the authors which we have already cited. Many authors believed that Malakut came from Malak which signifies “angel”. This other meaning comes from the fact that Arabic words are all derived from three-letter roots. Mulk as we have seen comes from the root MLK which we also find in Malakut, malik (king), mamlaka (country), and so forth. The Arabic dictionaries attach malak (angel) to the same root for the reason that the root of malak is MLK. However, this is only a sameness in appearance, for there are two roots MLK which have two completely different origins. One comes from Arabic and expresses possession, domination and sovereignty, and the other comes from Hebrew and signifies messenger. Malak is one of the numerous Quranic terms which were directly borrowed from Hebrew, and malak before meaning “angel” meant “envoy”.
The famous angels of Genesis who married the daughters of men were simply divine envoys, that is

to say, the elect. Malakah signifies “mission” in Hebrew. From this etymological confusion was born the idea that Malakut is the world of angels193. The theme was further developed in the course of the centuries.

Having arrived at this point, we see that we have surveyed all of the themes related to the question of the divine worlds such as we find them in the writings of Baha’u’llah. From this point of view, Baha’u’llah seems to attach value to a long tradition by organizing it, giving it a new internal coherence and a new interpretation.

9. The School of Isfahan

After al-Jurjani and al-Kashani we are tempted to pass over a few centuries and arrive directly at

Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i and the Shaykhi School. This jump could be explained by the fact that this system of the divine worlds is not enriched by a single new element except for the introduction of Hahut at the summit of the construction, at a date which we have not been able to precisely fix, but which is perhaps situated in the course of the 18th century. The developments of the School of Isfahan were often of a speculative character and had but little influence upon the tradition to which Baha'u'llah referred.

If we were to effect this jump, we would make a blind alley of the School of Isfahan, and we might would be justified in doing so, with regard to the aim we are pursuing, and considering the mediocrity of its contribution, notwithstanding what certain authors have written on the subject.
The School of Isfahan did no more than take up again the theories of Ibn Sina, al-Suhrawardi and Ibn al-'Arabi in giving them new elaborations marked by the Ithna 'Ashari Shi'i doctrine. To this School are attached the names of Mir Ghiyathu'd-Din, Mansur Shirazi, Mir Damad, Mulla Sadra Shirazi, Mulla Rajab, 'Ali Tabrizi, Siyyid Ahmad 'Alavi, Mulla Khalil Ghazvini, Muhsin-i-Fayd, 'Abdu'r-Razzaq Lahiji, Qadi Sa'id Qumi and many others of lesser importance. These authors who lived in the 17th and 18th centuries formed Persian Shi'i culture and stamped upon its theology an imprint from which it has yet to detach itself.

The School of Isfahan does not interest us here except to the extent that it collected in an onto-cosmological manner the theories of al-Suhrawardi and Ibn al-'Arabi upon the Imaginal World and visionary knowledge. That which characterizes this School, is not so much its doctrine, as its inclination for the visionary narrative which became a distinct literary and philosophical genre. All of these authors were ecstatics. Almost all were blessed with visions in which the secrets of the other world were revealed to them. These visions permitted them to closely associate with the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, the twelve Imams and the companions of the Prophet and to be instructed by them personally in the inner true doctrine of Islam. While it is undeniable that some of

these authors were sincere reporters of authentic visions, they nevertheless created a precedent
which would give rise to numerous emulators. From the 18th century onwards, the most effective
way of deciding a theological debate was not through the articulation of a decisive argument, but by
relating a dream or a vision that invoked the authority of the hidden Imam. This inclination was
conducive to the worst excesses imaginable, for charlatans and mystifiers were legion. In many

From whence the error, in our judgment, of the English translator of the "Seven Valleys" who renders
Malakut with "Kingdom of the angels". Cf. "The Seven Valleys," p. 25; "Les Sept Vallees," trad. fr., p. 27.

regards the Writings of Baha'u'llah are written in response to these excesses.

The authors of the School of Isfahan did not differ amongst themselves except upon subtle nuances.
This basic agreement impelled them to take up untiringly the same premises, to develop their theory
of Malakut and of the Imaginal World in a systematic manner, and to extent their ontological
reasonings to extremes of all sorts. Their method of reasoning was to become of formidable
complexity. We will give but a couple of examples.

For Mir Damad, Malakut contains the forms and images of all that exists, that is to say:

"the primordial existences and the existences engaged in what is to become, divine and
natural, celestial, perennial and temporal; and the people of infidelity and those of the Faith,
and the notions of Unconsciousness and, those of Islam; those which come from in front,
those which fall behind; those which precede, and those which succeed, in the centuries of
the centuries of the past and of the future. Briefly, the monads of the coalescences of the
possible, and the atoms of the existing universes, all in totality, in all their sides."194

We could cite many other texts which would enable us to enter into the arcanities of the School of
Isfahan, but we will cite but one other example taken from a later author, Qadi

Sa'id Qumi (1633-
1691). In his “Commentary on the tradition of the cloud” (Shahr-i hadith-i al-ghamama), Sa'id Qumi
distinguishes three ontological degrees (hadrat): first, the world of the invisible ('alam al-ghayb) which is
the suprasensible world; second, the world of sensible perception ('alam al-shahada); and a third world
born of the coalescence of these two worlds which he calls the world of the imaginative perceptions
('alam al-khayal) which is nothing other than the Imaginal World hypostasized and considered as an
intermediate sphere between the sensible and the intelligible. The world of the imaginative
perceptions is Malakut or the door of Malakut; for in fact, either there exist various kinds of Malakut,
or Malakut represents an intermediate sphere where the existing realities are hierarchically
organized. There is the Malakut of the vegetable world, then the Malakut of the animal world, then
the Malakut of the human reality which recapitulates in itself the three preceding degrees, for in man
there exists a Malakut of the vegetable life and of the animal life to which is added the Malakut of the
soul endowed with reason which permits man to elevate himself towards the intellectual realities.
This is not the ratiocinating reason that differentiates man from the animal, but the imaginative
faculty with which his soul is endowed which permits him to penetrate the world of the intelligible
realities. The word Malakut corresponds here to what ‘Abdu’l-Baha calls spirit (ruh).

Qumi thinks that man, having a spiritual dimension, possesses a “subtle body” which corresponds to
his dimension in Malakut. He calls it also “the Malakuti body”, and describes it as an intelligence
living in a subtle time and space which is different from the time [and space] of the sensible world.
The world of visions is thus a world of subtle bodies. It is only by means of the subtle body that the
Imams can manifest themselves to men. Malakut becomes in this way “the subtle dimension” of the
sensible realities. There is thus a Malakut for each kind of sensible reality and each Malakut is
governed by an angel which is the spirit of that reality. Corbin continues with the views of Sa'id
Qumi:

Henri Corbin, “En islam iranien,” tome IV, p. 45.

“a)there is a being of the Malakut which is the lord of the exoteric of the Earth (Kalimat ardiyya); b)there is a being of the Malakut which is the lord of the esoteric of the Earth; he designates it as Angel or Verb of the Malakut of the Earth (Kalimat Malakutiyya); c)below the one and the other, there is the lord Jabarut and Lahut of the earth (that is to say the Earth at the level of the cherubic Intelligences and at level of the divine Names; he designates it as Logos or divine Verb (Kalimat ilahiyya). Under the authority of the Angel of Malakut or esoteric of the Earth is found the metaphysical reality of time, and it is by this Angel that the involution of the time of our chronology is produced.”195

If we wished to make explicit the theory of Malakut of Qadi Sa'id Qumi, his thought becomes so complex that a single book would not suffice. His understanding of the hierarchies recalls that of Proclus (410-485). We have not wished here to give more than a foretaste in order to permit the reader to appreciate and begin to comprehend the subtlety of the metaphysics taught in the time of Baha’u’llah. This permits us to better grasp what is original in his thought and how it breaks with tradition. The theoretical simplicity of his writings is certainly in reaction to the philosophical doctrines of his time.

10. Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i

Before returning to the work of Baha’u’llah, it is left for us to take one last step in preparation which is represented by the work of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i. This one is considered as one of the two precursors to the revelation of the Bab. Baha’u’llah, in his “Book of Certitude” (Kitab-i-Iqan) renders him homage, even qualifying his inspiration as divine.

Before explaining the doctrine of Shaykh Ahmad upon the divine worlds, we must first address a certain number of ambiguities. Henri Corbin has negated with much insistence all kinship between Shaykhism and Babism and even more strongly any kinship between Shaykh Ahmad and the Baha’i

Faith. If he was speaking of the Shaykhi school of Kirman, which was opposed by the way to the less
numerous [school] of Tabriz, he had good reason to insist upon this point. The modern Shaykhis
were profoundly reformed by Haji Mirza Karim Khan-i-Kirmani after the death of Siyyid Kazim
Rashti, the immediate successor to Shaykh Ahmad. For the Baha'is, there is no doubt that Karim
Khan considerably distanced himself from the message of the founders of the Shaykhi School. The
history of the Shaykhi School traces its gradual absorption into the bosom of Shi'i orthodoxy in the
20th century. In 1950, the fundamentalist leader Falsafi, who agitated against the Baha'is with the
support of the army as with that of the government, brought about a great "witch-hunt" against all
ideological deviations from the Ithna 'Ashari Shi'i norm. He addressed twenty-five questions to the
head of the Shaykhi School who replied in a treatise entitled "Risalih-yi falsafiyyih" in so orthodox a
manner that Falsafi could only be astonished at why the Shaykhis insisted upon being designated by
a different name from their fellow Shi'is. This is an indication of how far they had come on the road
of accommodation from the theological audacities of Shaykh Ahmad which scandalized his
contemporaries.196

Ibid., tome IV, p. 161.
Moojan Momen, "An Introduction to Shi'i Islam," Oxford, 1985, pp. 222, 225-231.

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If we wish to evaluate the relationship between the present-day Shaykhi doctrine with the Baha'i
teachings, we will discover that there exists between the two doctrines a certain opposition. But how
it is with the writings of the founders? The Baha'is give a reading of the writings of Shaykh Ahmad
and Siyyid Kazim which reconcile them considerably to the writings of the Bab. But, this reading
was not inherent in the Shaykhi School. It was transmitted to them as an heritage by the first Babis,
the greater part of which were former Shaykhis who had received the teaching of Shaykh Ahmad
from the very mouth of Siyyid Kazim. He who today reads the treatises of Shaykh Ahmad might

well have the impression that in form and spirit they are written in a very different manner from the writings of the Bab, but nonetheless, he would discover numerous themes in common. This does not indicate, as some have written, that Baha'is today affirm that the two doctrines are identical. That would be absurd, and indeed if it were so, from a Baha'i point of view, what would have been the purpose of the Bab's ministry if the Shaykhis had already said everything he wanted to say? Actually there are fundamental divergences between the two which we would do well to recognize.

Nevertheless, these divergences are perhaps less important than some believe. For this there are two reasons: The first is that the doctrine of Shaykh Ahmad can receive several interpretations. One of these interpretations is that which wishes to conform to orthodoxy, for one must not forget that the Shaykh was menaced with persecutions his whole life long and that because of this he was constrained to practice what the Shi'is call taqiyyih or kitman, which is to say a mental restriction or pious dissimulation, permitting one to profess in public the contrary from what one teaches in private. The responses of Shaykh Ahmad to the attacks of the 'ulama' of Qazvin when he visited that town show that the Shaykh willingly practiced this pious dissimulation.197 Also, Shaykh Ahmad himself attests that his written teaching is incomprehensible if one does not have access to his oral teaching and if one does not understand the particular meaning which he gives to the usual philosophical expressions. The problem is this, that this oral teaching is lost. Nobody today possesses the key, and to reconstitute this key would necessitate long and patient research, if this could be accomplished at all. The second reason is that one can interpret the doctrine of the Shaykh as an enterprise in the deconstruction of Shi'i dogma opening the way to the theological revolution of the Bab. It is arguably with this aim that the Shaykh negates the reality of the dogma of the physical resurrection of the dead. He would empty it of all traditional significances in saying that this resurrection must be limited to a symbolic subtle body. This greatly facilitated the introduction of the doctrine of the Bab who reduces the resurrection to an event produced in

the soul of the
believer. This is but one example.198
The Bab, and Bahá'u'lláh after him, forbade this practice of pious
dissimulation with the aim of protecting
one's life or one's tranquillity. For example, in one of his letters,
Bahá'u'lláh wrote: "In this Day, We can
neither approve the conduct of the fearful that seeketh to dissemble his faith,
nor sanction the behavior of
the avowed believer that clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this Cause.
Both should observe the dictates
of wisdom, and strive diligently to serve the best interests of the Cause."
(GL, CLXIV, p. 343)
When I found myself in Iran in 1977 and 1978, I had occasion to frequent
Shaykhi communities at some
length. At the request of Dr. Bahmayar, I translated a little book of Shaykh
Ibrahimi, the last Shaykh who
issued from the lineage of Karim Khan-i-Kirmani, entitled "Nazar bar
qarn-i-bistum" (View of the Twentieth
Century). I was thus able to experience firsthand that there is no longer much
separating the modern
Shaykhis from orthodox Shi'is. The writings of Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid Kazim
are practically unknown
to them, even if their memory continues to be the object of veneration. Henri
Corbin has unfortunately
been abused upon many points by Shaykh Ibrahimi. Dr. Bahmanyar was among those
who thought that
the Bahá'ís had calumniated Shaykh Ahmad in ascribing to him their doctrine
under the pretext that his
doctrines resembled the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. It seems that this is
the reason why the Shaykhi hierarchy
formally discourages the reading of the writings of Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid
Kazim except those who first

We recognize that there are important differences between the doctrine of the
Shaykh and the
message of the Bab, but we must also recognize that the Shaykh prepared a vast
public to accept the
doctrine of the Bab. To those who would wish to oppose their own
interpretations of the writings of
the Shaykh to its function of spiritual parentage, we contrast its historical
impact. In depth
sociological studies have shown that the great majority of the first Babis were
of Shaykhi origin and
many of these were numbered among the closest disciples of the Shaykhs199. If
they accepted with
such enthusiasm the message of the Bab, surely we can surmise that this was

because that message
was perfectly consistent with the teaching they had received from the Shaykhs, even if the contents
and the spirit were not totally identical.

We do not claim here to sort out this complex question, and perhaps future publications will permit
us to return to it in detail.

Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i on the one hand took up the development of the doctrine of the intermediate
world (barzakh), the Imaginal World ('alam al-mithal) and Malakut, in giving it a new orientation. On
the other hand, he elaborated his doctrine of an intermediary world which he calls Huqalya, a term
which he borrows from the Sabean religion and the etymology of which is uncertain. The word does
not appear to be of Semitic origin and must go back to an old Sumerian or Mesopotamian
substratus which is lost in the night of time. In the “Jawami' al-Kalim” he writes:

“As for the word Hurqalya, the significance relates to another world. That which is
designated by this word, is the world of barzakh (interworld); there is in effect the inferior
world, the terrestrial world; it is the world of the material bodies constituted of Elements, the
world visible to the senses. And there is the world of Souls, which is the intermediary world
between the visible material world ('alam al-mulk) and the world of Malakut in another
universe. It is another Material world. Otherwise said, the world of the bodies composed of
elements constitutes that which we call the visible material world. The world of Huqalya, this
is another material world (world of a material of subtle state).”200

Shaykh Ahmad situates Barzakh between Malakut and the world of Muluk. If there is the employment
of the term Huqalya it is because this intermediary world has a complex geography which responds
above all to the preoccupations imposed by the architecture of its metaphysical and ontological
theory. Shaykh Ahmad has written regarding this complex geography:

“The term Huqalya is employed to designate the heavens of this intermediary world. Jabalqa
is a city of the Orient (this is a metaphysical orient), that is to say from

the side of the return
and the result...the world of Malakut is constituted of substances and of
beings separated from
matter, even as our visible physical world is constituted of material
realities. It is necessary
that between the two worlds there is an intermediary, a barzakh, that is to say
a world the

become well versed in the writings of the more recent Shaykhs under the
direction of Shaykh Ibrahimi
himself.
Abbas Amanat, “Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bábí Movement in
Iran, 1844-1850,”
Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 261-273, 275-284.
Extract from “Risalat al-Qatifiyya” published in the collection of the
works of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i entitled
“Jawami' al-Kalim,” Tabriz, 1273 A.H., volume I, 3rd part, 9th risalat, pp.
153-154; translated by Henri
Corbin in “Terre celeste et corps de resurrection,” p. 294.

state of which is not the absolutely subtle state of the separated substances,
nor the opaque
density of the material things of our world. Without this universe, the
gradation of being
world make a jump, there would be a hiatus.”201

Many others have made use of the theory of the divine worlds as a hermeneutical
key to expand the
repertoire of their exegetical figures. But the originality of Shaykh Ahmad
resides in the fact that he
used this cosmo-ontological theory as a hermeneutical process applied to
eschatology, and more
particularly to the question of the resurrection. This hermeneutical employment
of a cosmo-
ontological theory gives a preview of the method of Baha’u’llah in the
“Tablet of All Food.”

According to Shaykh Ahmad, man possesses four bodies, which are associated with
one another.
These bodies represent the different ontological dimensions of man.

First is the physical body (jasad) which represents the world of Mulk.
Associated with this physical
body is a subtle body that represents the dimension of the body in the world of
Huqalya. Shaykh
Ahmad tells us that this body is imperishable and that it lives on “in the
tomb” until the day of
resurrection.

With these two bodies (jasad) are associated two other bodies (jism). The first jism is the astral body of
Huqalya. It is composed of the substance of Huqalya. It is this which serves as the vehicle of the spirit,
but it is not spirit. It is a sort of support for the second body. It plays in relation to the second jism the
same role that the physical body plays in relation to the subtle body. Its habitation is barzakh. Finally
comes the archetypal body whose habitation is the Imaginal World.

At the moment of resurrection, Shaykh Ahmad tells us, only the subtle body that lives on in the
tomb is reborn. The process of rebirth is effected through its reunion with the archetypal body.

One can see in this theory a way of resolving the difficulties pertaining to the resurrection of the
flesh. This was what Shaykh Ahmad said to those detractors who accused him of purely and simply
denying the resurrection. But, innumerable elements indicate that the Master had two doctrines —
an exoteric one destined for the orthodox theologians, and an esoteric one reserved for his faithful
disciples. For the former, he maintained that his doctrine was no more than a different way of
speaking about the resurrection. For the latter, he explained that the resurrection was an interior
event in the life of the soul, and that this interior event would be the fate of those alone who would
live to witness the parousia of the Imam. This is confirmed for us by the “doctrine of the tomb”. The
doctrine of the tomb of Shaykh Ahmad has two meanings. When he says that the subtle body lives
on like a trace in the tomb, in appearance he appears to grant a concession to the orthodox
theologians. But for his followers, who understand the technical meaning that he gives to the word
“tomb”, it is recognized that he completely empties out all the Islamic traits of the theological
concept of the resurrection. In his “Risalat al-qatifiyya”, he writes that, far from designating the place
in which the physical body is buried, “the tomb signifies the nature of the person, his life, his most
intimate desire.” Later he adds:

“Expressions such as that 'the Spirit will return to man (who is in the tomb)' are expressions
which correspond to the apparent or the exoteric meaning. In reality, this

refers to events
Ibid., pp. 295-296.

which are not accomplished in the inferior world, that of the objective thing, but at the most
elevated level among the degrees of time, that is to say in Huqalya. And if I say 'at the most
elevated level', 'at the highest of the degrees of time', it is because Huqalya is a between two
(barzakh). Sometimes one employs it to designate the highest degree of time (zaman),sometimes one employs it to designate the inferior level or degree of eternity
(dahr).”202

The Bab does not say anything substantially different when he affirms that “for every spirit there is a
tomb which is predestined for him according to the limitations of his rank”203, that is to say that the
tomb is nothing other than the physical and psychical person that is not reborn through the power
of revelation. Later he adds: “The tomb in which all will be questioned is in this world of
contingency.”204

We thus see that for Shaykh Ahmad the ontological questions are secondary. That which counts, is
that the believer prepared himself for the parousia in renouncing the old Muslim myths, so as to
prepare himself for an event which, if it takes place in the interior of his soul, no less so has an
historical dimension. What was the reality of the Huqalya for him? One could be tempted to think
that it is but a commodity of language that served to justify theological audacities.

The work of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i, as also that of Siyyid Kazim Rashti is extremely rich upon the
ontological question of the divine worlds. One would have to effect a global study of his metaphysic
and especially to precisely determine his terminology in order to definitely determine the points of
contact between the Shaykhi writings and those of the Bab and Baha’u’llah. There is no doubt that,
putting aside his theory of subtle bodies and of the world of Huqalya, the esoteric purpose of which
we have succinctly described, in certain ways the Malakut of Shaykh Ahmad prefigures the Kingdom

of Abha in the Baha'i writings. We also find a kinship between the theories of the Shaykh and the "Commentary on the Hidden Treasure" (Tafsir-i-Kuntu kanzan) of 'Abdu'l-Baha which we will discuss in depth in Chapter XVI.

Shaykh Ahmad in his commentary upon the "Book of Metaphysical Penetrations" (Kitab al-Masha'ir) of Mulla Sadra gave a definition of Malakut very close to that which is found in the writings of Baha'u'llah. Shaykh Ahmad writes:

"Almost always, when the philosophers employ the word Malakut, they mean by this the world of the souls ('alam al-nufus), that is to say the world of the entities separated from the elementary matter and from chronological duration (muddat zamaniyya), but not from form, because their forms and faces are analogous to those of the visible world through the senses ('alam al-shahada).205 But it also happens that the word is employed to designate in general fashion the hegemony of things (zimam; literally "guide," "reign") because of which these things continue to exist, as in the Quranic verse (sic): 'Ask them in whose hands is the Malakut

Ibid., pp. 292-293.
"Bayan-i-farsi," Vahid II, Bab 9; translated by A.L.M. Nicolas, "Le Beyan Persan," Paris: Librairie Geuthner, 1911, tome I, p. 88. Translator's Note: French rendered into English by yours truly.
Ibid., p. 89.
It is what we call elsewhere the sensible world.

of all things, He Who protects and Who needs no protection"206 And in this Malakut are the suprasensible realities of things (haqa'iq al-ashya al-ghaybiyya)."207

Here, Corbin translated haqa'iq (plural of haqiqa) with "suprasensible realities". The Baha'i writings generally translates this word by "spiritual realities", or by "essences". "Essence" would seem to be an appropriate word if one takes care not to project upon it notions inherited from Aristotle, from the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages, or even from the metaphysics of the 20th century. Thus for Shaykh Ahmad as for 'Abdu'l-Baha in his "Tafsir," Malakut is the world

of the “spiritual realities” (haqa'iq). Does this term represent the Platonic Idea or the Aristotelian Form? Certainly not in the case of ‘Abdu’l-Baha. It can not refer to the Aristotelian Form because the existence of this Form is purely rational. It consists of an abstract entity that can not be separated from matter except to exist in itself in the course of being in action, which seems to be impossible. However, for Shaykh Ahmad matter is not a being in action as believed by the Peripatetics208. It is also not a Platonic Idea because the Platonic Idea does not multiply itself in order to exist individually in the reality of things. The Idea is a universal from which the existence of the particular beings derives. But, for Shaykh Ahmad, the realities of Malakut are clearly individualities. They are simply the spiritual realities that are the counterpart at the level of Malakut of the terrestrial realities. Every terrestrial reality, or every sensible reality, has its counterpart in Malakut which is in some way its image (Baha’u’llah will invert the metaphor in explaining that the sensible realities are the projected dimension of the spiritual realities). The sensible realities are hierarchically submitted to the spiritual realities; it is they which govern them, and because of this Shaykh Ahmad says that Malakut constitutes the reins (zimam) of the physical world, which Corbin translates by “hegemony” alluding to the Stoic concept of “hegemonikon”. The action of God is thus directly upon the spiritual realities.

In another passage, closer in sensibility to Ibn 'Arabi, the Shaykh lightly distances himself from this interpretation. He writes:

“The 'urafa209 most often employ the word Malakut for the world of the souls. As in the case of Jabarut, most employ the word to designate the world of the pure intelligences210. Certain ones however employ it to designate the ensemble of Mulk (the visible world) and Malakut. There are some who inverse this and who put Malakut above Jabarut. Often in the Qur'an (sic) and in the traditions [hadith], the word Malakut is employed to signify the malakut (the hegemony) of a thing, because of which this thing lives. For the author211 it signifies the

intelligent agent ('aql fa'al), that is to say the God by Whom creation is created (al-Haqq al-

Quran 23:90. The English translation cited here is derived from the French of Corbin, quoted by the
author. The Arabic original is as follows: Surat al-mu'minun (Surah of the faithful): qul man biyadihi malakUtu kulli
shay'in wa huwa yujiyru wa lA yujAru 'alayhi...
Text translated and cited by Henri Corbin in “Le Livre des Penetrations Mystiques,” of Mulla Sadra
Shirazi, Paris, 1988, p. 175, note 1. Translator’s Note: French rendered into English by yours truly.
In a text that we will study in the following Chapter we see the great Bahá’í commentator and philosopher
Ishraq-Khavari giving an interpretation of Malakut which is altogether Peripatetic. For reasons which we will
develop, this does not appear to us to conform to the thought of Bahá’u’lláh.
That is to say the mystics who possess gnosis (ma'rifat).
This is thus a Neoplatonic gnosis such as that found in Ibn Sina.
This is Mulla Sadra whom Shaykh Ahmad is in the midst of discussing.

makhluqbihi).”212

Mulla Sadra, whom Shaykh Ahmad comments upon without contradiction, believed that God first
created the spiritual realities and that it was from this first creation that secondarily flowed the
existence of the sensible realities. It is interesting to note that the expression borrowed from Ibn al-
'Arabi is here completed turned away from its original meaning. It seems that for Ibn al-'Arabi the
term “the God by Whom and from Whom the creation is created” implied a certain pantheism if
one admits that “al-Haqq” (the absolute reality) designates God; and this is how Henri Corbin
translates the expression, thus indicating a counter meaning. For we see Mulla Sadra and Shaykh
Ahmad identify “al-Haqq” with the Intelligent Agent, that is to say the first emanation of God213. We
can not fail to think here of the “Most Great Spirit” of which Baha’u’llah speaks in “The Surah of
the Temple” (Suriy-i-Haykal) which he describes as the true generative agent of creation and the
first divine emanation. Nevertheless, the intentions of Shaykh Ahmad are often ambiguous and the
impression remains that he does not reveal the depth of his thought.

Furthermore, Shaykh Ahmad
often kept his distance from the 'urafa, the mystics and the philosophers,
including Ibn al-'Arabi and
Mulla Sadra. In particular, he explained why he could not adhere to the
doctrine of existential
monism (wah.dat al-wujud) of Ibn al-'Arabi. Shaykh Ahmad explains that he
doubts that one can
speak in the same fashion of the absolute reality (al-Haqq), which is an
absolute being (wujuud mutlaq),
and of the creation (khalq). He establishes a distinction between the being
which is adventitious,
which has come to the world and which depends upon states (ahwal), and the
absolute eternal and
non-contingent being.

Human experience is limited to the adventitious being that corresponds to the
created world. About
the absolute being (wujuud al-Haqq) one can speak only in an apophatic manner
in saying what “is
not” without being able to say what “is”. Baha’u’llah would not
disagree.

“Le Livre des Penetrations Mystiques,” op. cit., p. 19. The expression
“al-Haqq al-makhluq bihi” is borrowed
from the vocabulary of Ibn 'Arabi.
He it is Who created the heavens and the earth by Haqq, the day in which He
said “be!”, and it was. His
speech is Haqq; to Him belongs the physical world (mulk), the day in which He
will breathe in the trumpet.
He it is Who knows the invisible and the visible (al-ghayb wa'l-shuhud). He is
the Wise, the Informed.” This is
clearly a translation of Qur'an 6:73, Surat al-an'am (Surah of the cattle): wa
huwa'l-ladhiy khalaqa'sh-shumawati
wa'l-arDa bi'l-haqqi wa yawma yaquwlu kun fayakuwnu qawluhu'l-lhaqqu wa
lahu'l-mulku yawma yunfakhu fi's-suwri
'alimu'l-ghaybi wa'sh-shahAdati wa huwa'l-hakiymu'l-khabiyru. Another
vocalization of the verse permits one to
read: “the day in which He breathes in the trumpet of the world of the
invisible and the visible.” We will
develop this notion of the invisible and the visible in the following Chapter.
The commentators often
translate the word “haqq” by “truth”, which gives “He it is Who
created the heavens and the earth by the
truth”, or as suggests Kasimirski “by a true creation”. However the
philosophers and the mystics have given
the word “haqq” in this verse a much larger meaning. They considered that
“haqq” was the instrument
which God made use of in order to bring the world into being or to organize the

cosmos and they identified
“haqq” with the Intelligent agent ('aql fa'al) or to the First emanation.
We find the same expression in three
other verses of the Qur'an: 15:85; 39:5; 46:3.

CHAPTER FIVE:
THE DIVINE WORLDS IN THE WORK OF BAHA’U’LLAH

1. Hermeneutical aspects

If we have taken the trouble to retrace the entire history of the doctrine of the spiritual worlds in
Islam, particularly in the School of Isfahan and in the Shaykhi School, and at the risk of distracting
the reader and of losing sight of the Baha’i texts, it is not out of a simple concern to be
comprehensive in scope, but rather to represent the large lines of the historical development of this
spiritual terminology. It seemed important to us that the reader take notice of the intellectual world
in which Baha’u’llah lived. Persian society was a organism impregnated with the sacred in which
metaphysical and ontological problems constituted the very basis of its religious culture. For
centuries, theories, increasingly complex, progressively sophisticated, were created to explain these
problems. These theories, the fruits of a long tradition inherited from the Hellenistic world, served as
the basis for new metaphysical investigations founded upon logical reasonings fairly similar to those
present in Western scholasticism. To the degree that confidence in reason was lost, increasing
reliance was placed upon intuition. Every “doctor” produced his own system, each one more
complex than its predecessor, with no other concern than for the internal coherency of that theory.
Each system was susceptible to admitting numerous variations and nuances, and these variations
and nuances became, in the theological schools, the subject of unending discussions.

The aim of this enterprise was no longer to arrive at a global explanation of the universe and of
divine Revelation, but rather to produce an exegesis which presented itself as a true theosophy to
such a degree that the link between its hermeneutic of Revelation and the sensible world was

ruptured. Esotericism made the exoteric disappear. The abusive usage of metaphysical imagination had destroyed the basis of reason. The sciences of nature had totally disappeared, replaced by vague superstitions. There no longer existed any operational representation of nature, even though we know that such a representation constitutes a fundamental element in every theosophy. Even medicine, which originally had been one of the most advanced in the world, had disappeared in its scientific form. The brief specimens of these philosophical discussions which we have furnished to the reader in the preceding chapter no doubt seemed foreign to him. An abyss now separates the man of the twentieth century from the “doctors” of the School of Isfahan or even the “masters” of the Shaykhi School. It is necessary to take the measure of this abyss in order to understand the original, nay the revolutionary character of the thought of Baha’u’llah, which will restore the philosophy of nature and the search for the fundamental reality of the universe to the body of mystic thought and spiritual hermeneutic.

Whenever Baha’u’llah takes up the mystical language of the Arabo-Persian tradition it is always in a metaphorical sense and not in order to approve the dogmas which were generated therefrom. This is the case with all the vocabulary of the Ishraqi theophany, such as ishraq (auroral light), mashriq (orient, dawn), tajalli (radiance, effulgence, emanation), zuhur (manifestation, appearance), mazhar (place of manifestation), ufuq (horizons), and so forth. These words are, in the work of Baha’u’llah, redirected from their original meaning to express new ideas in the midst of a philosophy that denies

all dogmatism and all systematic philosophical theorization. It is in the spirit of this transformation that we must examine the role and the place of the terminology of the divine worlds in the work of Baha’u’llah.

It is also important to emphasize that Baha’u’llah broke with the entire philosophical tradition of Islam. He rejects the ontology of Ibn Sina which furnished that tradition with its principal structure

over the course of several centuries. He repudiates the theory of the creative Imagination which Ibn Sina, Ibn al-'Arabi and al-Suhrawardi developed. He also rejects existential monism which, since al-Hallaj, seemed to be the only form of thought definitely opposed to Islamic orthodoxy. He dares to affirm the eternity of the creation and reduces to allegorical symbols the greater part of the Quranic dogmas, including the resurrection, the final judgment, the appearance face to face with God, the angels, the Imams, and so on. The profundity of his thought manifests itself above all in its limpidity which contrasts it with the extreme sophistication of the thought systems of his time.

One does not find in the work of Baha'u'llah a single exposition sui generis of an ontological or metaphysical theory. This does not mean to say that Baha'u'llah did not have any conception of his own in this domain. But this conception is implicit. The only way to rediscover it is to become impregnated with his work, to study it deeply and to meditate thereon. Then abysses of wisdom reveal themselves. This refusal of all theorization by Baha'u'llah is fundamental. The Manifestations of God do not come to construct systems. The elaboration of a knowing discourse is the province of theologians, mystics and philosophers who follow the Manifestations in each Dispensation.

In the Writings of Baha'u'llah, it is often necessary to compare one text with several others in order to release the complete image of his thought. This brevity exemplifies the great reserve which Baha'u'llah leaves to be penetrated in the case of metaphysical questions. This reserve exists for two reasons. The first refers to the concept which Baha'u'llah has of his own mission. A Manifestation of God is not a professor of philosophy, no more than he is a medical doctor, a biologist, a physicist or other specialist. The Manifestation of God does not come to reveal to us the secrets of the universe, but to give us a moral and spiritual teaching susceptible of contributing to the spiritual expansion of man. The spiritual blooming of man is found in detachment, in the service of humanity and in teaching the Cause of God, not in metaphysical speculation.

However, the brevity of the discourses consecrated by Baha'u'llah to the divine worlds, and the evident reserve with which these are treated, should not make us believe that the subject has little importance in his eyes. He habitually employs this concise and stripped down manner of writing which delivers only the essential. One could even say that the absence of literary ornament always characterizes the most important passages of his writings. The "Most Holy Book" (Kitab-i-Aqdas) is the very model of brevity and concision. The establishment of Houses of Justice, signally the foundation of the Baha'i Administrative Order, is treated in less than three lines and none of his essential points receives a long elaboration.

What is fundamental in the exposition of Baha'u'llah in the "Tablet of All Food" is the link that he establishes between the question of the divine worlds and a spiritual hermeneutic (ta'wil), in which he indicates that a certain food (understood as spiritual in nature) corresponds to each world, and that at the same time the word "food" itself is susceptible to receiving an interpretation particular to its function in each of these worlds, so that in fact the term contains innumerable significances.

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Hence, the importance of this hierarchy of the divine worlds does not reside in its articulation of a metaphysical system, but rather in the key which it yields for unlocking the symbolic language of Baha'u'llah. Their function is purely hermeneutic. In other words, and contrary to the entire philosophical tradition of Islam, the description of these worlds does not seem to imply adherence to the positive existence of these worlds as realities in the cosmic plan. Baha'u'llah does not say that these five worlds objectively exist. His hermeneutical vision as developed in the "Tablet of All Food", is contrasted thereby to his metaphysical concept of the three worlds —World of the divine Essence, the World of Revelation and the World of Creation. But even these three worlds are not presented as the only accurate picture of reality but rather they function as an operational vision of reality.

2. Vocabulary

One of the best means to decipher the thought of Baha'u'llah is to proceed with a detailed study of his vocabulary. Of course, it was impossible for us to read the whole of the work of Baha'u'llah. Therefore we had to select a body of work to study in depth. We chose the anthology of selections chosen by Shoghi Effendi, entitled "Munajat" in the original Arabic and "Prayers and Meditations" in his English translation. An excellent edition of the Arabic text was published in 1981 in Rio de Janeiro. This edition has greatly facilitated our work. These texts are particularly interesting because they are among the most mystical from the pen of Baha'u'llah. One does not find therein any didactic exposition, but nevertheless it is a mine of information for those examining metaphysical questions.

We must then ask whether the vocabulary which Baha'u'llah utilizes here is representative of the whole of his work. It is not certain that it is, inasmuch as the greater part of these texts appear to be dialogues between Baha'u'llah and God, and do not lend themselves to philosophical development. However, the examination of other texts, notably "The Book of Certitude" (Kitab-i-Iqan) and the Tablets revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas, has not modified the conclusions we have reached while studying "Munajat".

A detailed study of the vocabulary of the divine worlds in the "Munajat" shows that the usage of these terms is extremely complex and the following are my impressions of the full range of their meanings.

Baha'u'llah very frequently employs the expression Malakut but this term does not have one but rather various different meanings. We also find a very frequent employment of the pair Malakut-Jabarut. The gathering of the four worlds of Lahut, Jabarut, Malakut, Nasut is mentioned only twice214. Outside of these two citations, there is no other reference to Lahut or Nasut. The term Mulk is used but rarely.

3. Malakut

If we take up the citations which refer to Malakut, we find that the term

appears forty-one times in an isolated manner, in two hundred twenty-seven pages of texts. With the exception of the expressions

“Prayers and Meditations” (henceforth abbreviated as PM), No. 38, p. 53; No. 178, p. 295.

“Thy Malakut”215 and “Our Malakut”216, the term is always accompanied by qualifiers or determinants. These are rarely adjectives; one finds only one example of this: “the resplendent (usna) Malakut”. The expressions which are repeated the most frequently are “the Malakut of creation (insha)” which is mentioned eight times and “the Malakut of names ('asma')” which is mentioned seven times. For all the other expressions, which are sixteen in number, one finds only one or two examples for each. This variety of usage shows the refusal of Baha’u’llah to utilize stereotypical expressions, and contradicts the impression of certain Western readers who find his writings very repetitive. In fact, repetitions are very rare and one finds on the contrary a great wealth of verbalizations. We find expressions which are Quranic remembrances, such as “the Malakut of the earth and the heavens” (al-ard wa'l-samawat)217; “the Malakut of the domain of the earth and the heavens” (Malakut mulk al-ard wa'l-samawat)218; “the Malakut of all things (kullu shay)”219; “the Malakut of Thy Revelation [or of Thy Cause or of Thy Command (amrika)]”220, with variations such as “the Makakut of Thy Revelation and of Thy sovereignty” (amrika was sultanika)221 and “ the Malakut of Thy Revelation and Thy creation” (amrika wa khalqika)222. There are other expressions, such as “the Malakut of existence (wujud)”223; “the Malakut of bounties [or of gifts (ahsan)]”224; “the Malakut of Thy proximity (ghurbika)”225; “the Malakut of the visible and the invisible (al-ghayb wa'l-shuhud)”226; “the eternal Malakut (Malakut-i-baqa)”227; “the Malakut of Thy exposition (bayanika)”228; “the Malakut of Thy signs [or of Thy verses (ayyatika)]”229; “the Malakut of Thy Beauty (Jamal)”230; and “the Malakut of Thine irrevocable decree (qada)”231.

“Munajat,” No. 38, p. 41; English: PM, No. 38, p. 49. “Munajat,” No. 172, p. 134.

“Munajat,” No. 77, pp. 88-89. “Munajat,” No. 172, p. 181.
“Munajat,” No. 14, p. 17; English: PM, No. 14, p. 17. Shoghi Effendi gives the following translation:
“Glorified be Thy name, Thou in Whose hands are the kingdom of earth and heaven.”
“Munajat,” No. 75, p. 86; English: PM, No. 75, p. 123. “Munajat,” No. 80, p. 92; English: PM, No. 80, p. 133.
“Munajat,” No. 97, p. 111; English: PM, No. 97, p. 163. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: “the empire of all things.”
“Munajat,” No. 129, p. 146; English: PM, No. 129, p. 217. Shoghi Effendi translates by “the kingdom of Thy Cause”. “Amr” can have three meanings.
“Munajat,” No. 38, p. 39; English: PM, No. 38, p. 50. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: “the kingdom of Thy revelation and Thy sovereignty.”
“Munajat,” No. 179, p. 202; English: PM, No. 179, p. 302.
“Munajat,” No. 16, p. 18; English: PM, No. 16, p. 19. Shoghi Effendi translates: “the empire of all things”.
“Munajat,” No. 62, p. 72; English: PM, No. 62, p. 99. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: “the source of all gifts”.
“Munajat,” No. 31, p. 30.
“Munajat,” No. 38, p. 41; English: PM, No. 38, p. 54. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: “the visible and invisible kingdoms”.
“Munajat,” No. 173, p. 178. Unusual to this collection of writings, this is a text in Persian. “Baqa” can be understood be it as an adjective or be it as a substantive.
“Munajat,” No. 176, p. 181, 182.
“Munajat,” No. 176, p. 185.
“Munajat,” No. 177, p. 192.
“Munajat,” No. 96, n.p.; English: PM, No. 96, p. 161. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: “the Kingdom of

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

4. The Kingdom of creation

Among all these terms, the one which is repeated the most frequently, is that of the “Kingdom of creation (Malakut al-insha)”. “Insha” is one of the words which Baha’u’llah utilizes for creation (the others being “ikhtira”, “ibda”, “khalq”, “sun'“ and “ijad”)232. The term is sometimes rendered into English by Shoghi Effendi by the word “invention”233. In certain cases, this word designates the

lower, terrestrial world. This is the case when Baha'u'llah writes, speaking of himself:

"No sooner had He proclaimed Thy Cause, and risen up to carry out the things prescribed unto Him in the Tablets of Thy decree, than the Great Terror (al-faza al-akbar) fell upon Thy creatures (bariyyatika). Some turned towards Thee, and detached themselves from all except Thee, and sanctified their souls from the world ('an ma 'ala ard) and all that is therein, and were so enravished by the sweetness of Thy voice that they forsook all Thou hadst created in the kingdom of Thy creation(Malakut al-insha)."234

In this case, Malakut al-insha is clearly a synonym of Mulk or of Nasut. It thus denotes the physical and sensible world. In other cases, Malakut al-insha has a much more immaterial meaning which Shoghi Effendi renders by "Kingdom of invention". Insha in this case does not refer to the sensible world, but to a state in which the cosmos exists upon a level different from the physical world. It is another ontological sphere that one could, perhaps, reconcile with the Imaginal World. Everything that exists in creation, be it in the physical world or in the spiritual worlds, exists in the World of Insha, but this is an existence ontologically different from sensible or even spiritual existence. Perhaps one could speak of virtual existence; perhaps one could even speak of virtual existence in the thought of God or in a world of pure thought.

An example of the immaterial character of the World of Insha is given us by the following citation:

"I implore Thee, O Thou Who causest the dawn to appear, by Thy Lamp which Thou didst light with the fire of Thy love before all that are in heaven and on earth, and whose flame Thou feedest with the fuel of Thy wisdom in the kingdom of Thy creation (Malakut al-insha)..."235

In another text the World of Insha designates all the spiritual favors which man can have at his command:

"Hold Thou Thy creatures, O my God, with the hands of Thy grace, and make Thou known unto them what is best for them of all the things that have been created

in the
kingdom of Thine invention. (Malakut al-insha)”236

Thine irrevocable decree”.
Note creation.
Translator’s Note: PM, No. 152, p. 244; No. 80, p. 133.
Translator’s Note: PM, No. 61, p. 97.
“Munajat,” No. 28, p. 27; English: PM, No. 28, pp. 32-33.
236PM, No. 27, p. 31.

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

5. The Kingdom of Names

Another important expression is that of the Kingdom of Names (Malakut al-'asma'). In the work of
Baha’u’llah there exists a veritable theology of the divine Names which deserves profound study and
the waters of which we may only dip into in this context. The divine Name (ism; plural asma) is in
fact an attribute (s.ifa), which is distinct from the divine Essence. The divine Names are collectively
the first manifestation of God, and it is through them, and because of them, that all contingent
existence was created. Even as the Holy Spirit represents the active force of creation, they represent
the passive force. The Holy Spirit is the agency of cause, while the Names are the efficient cause. For
example, Love is the manifestation of one of the Names of God, for it is by the Love that God had
for His own Essence that the Love of His manifestation was engendered, and from the Love of His
manifestation was engendered the Love of His creation. We understand that Love is the cause of
creation, but it is not the acting instrumental force.237 It is the same for the Beauty of God.
However, in reality, all of these explanations are born of the limitations of the human spirit. The
distinction of the divine attributes from the divine Essence proceeds from a primary illusion. Every
divine Name contains in itself all the other divine Names, and therefore, to distinguish the divine
Names from each other is a second illusion. To wish to distinguish the passive force of the Names
from the active force of the divine Verb or Holy Spirit is a third illusion. These illusions are
nevertheless necessary in order to apprehend the inapprehendable.

The Kingdom of Names, is not a world distinct from the other divine worlds; it

is a world which manifests itself within all the divine worlds from the sphere of Lahut to the sphere of Nasut. The divine Names are not just the efficient cause of creation, they constitute, in a certain fashion, the ultimate reality of the universe, and the very foundation of the cosmos. Every thing, every being, is a reflection, even far-off, of the divine Names. If something ceased to reflect these Names, even to the slightest degree, it would immediately cease to exist.

Upon the level of Lahut, the divine Names are identified with the Verb (Kalimat), with the Primal Will (mashiyyat-i-avvaliyyih) and with the Holy Spirit (ruh). In the lower worlds, the supreme manifestation of the divine Names is the divine Manifestation, that is to say the soul of the Prophet. Baha'u'llah tells us for example that his name is "the name of Him round Whom circleth in adoration the kingdom of Thy names"238. This means that the particular name which is in question, the name which remains unnamed, but which in other Tablets he designates by the name of Baha', is considered upon the ontological level in which it exists to be in total union with the divine Essence. It is because this Name exists upon this level of undifferentiated union that it reflects the totality of the divine perfections and that thus the individualized manifestations of these Names are totally subordinated thereto. This ontological level we have described in Chapter Two as the state of Jabarut. The name of Baha' in this state does not designate the actual identity of an individual, but, rather the name which the Prophet assumes as the Alpha and Omega, as the Spirit united to the divine Essence in communion with all the other Manifestations and one in being with them.

The Kingdom of Names is also manifested to men in the Word of the divine Manifestation, not

On the different kinds of love, see "The Seven Valleys", p. 25; and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Paris Talks," pp. 179-181 (4 January 1913).
"Munajat," No. 71, p. 83; English: PM, No. 71, p. 117.

merely in the words nor even in the phrases, but in the Revelation (wahy), that

is to say in the innate
knowledge of the divine Manifestations. It is for this reason that each Name plays an essential role in
creation. For example, if the manifestation of Oneness were to diminish, the world would perish.
Thus Baha'u'llah writes:

"I recognize, moreover, that were any of the revelations (zuhurat) of Thy names and Thine
attributes to be withheld, though it be the weight of a grain of mustard seed, from
whatsoever hath been created by Thy power and begotten by Thy might, the foundations of
Thine everlasting handiwork (sun') would thereby be made incomplete, and the gems
(jawhar) of Thy Divine wisdom would become imperfect."239

The equilibrium of the divine Names, such as Justice and Mercy for example, assure the equilibrium
of the world. Every Name is reflected in all the degrees of being, which is why there exists a Malakut
of each Name, and it is for this reason that Baha'u'llah speaks for example of the Malakut of Beauty.
Baha'u'llah says:

"I testify that through Him the Pen of the Most High was set in motion, and with His
remembrance (dhikrihi) the Scriptures (lawh) in the kingdom of names were embellished."240

The "Scriptures" here referred to are not, it seems to us, the Holy Books in their terrestrial version,
but more likely, the "Mother-Book," "the preserved Tablet" (al-lawh al-mahfuz), the celestial
prototype of all the Books, the matrix from which all the revelations originated.

In a lower ontological level, the divine Manifestations appear in their differentiated states. Thus
Baha'u'llah writes:

"No sooner had Thy most sweet voice been raised, than all the inmates of the Kingdom of
Names and the Concourse on high were stirred up."241

The Kingdom of Names here designates the habitation of the souls of the Prophets, who are
distinguished from the Concourse on high representing the martyrs and the saints. We are at this
point in the sphere properly denominated Malakut.

In the world of man, the Kingdom of Names and attributes manifests itself in human qualities.
These qualities are but the reflection of the divine qualities in man. In the state of potentiality, they
represent “the divine bestowal”. The aim of terrestrial existence is to develop these qualities and thus
to permit the Kingdom of Names to manifest itself through us. In one of his Tablets, Baha’u’llah
explains that an excessive attachment to the “names” can become an obstacle to spiritual
development.242 This is the case of a person who has arrived at developing in himself a divine
quality such as benevolence for example; this man can take a liking to becoming a manifestation of
benevolence, he can come to enjoy it as he would a pleasure. He becomes attached to benevolence

“Munajat,” No. 184, p. 218; English: PM, No. 184, p. 325.
“Munajat,” No. 31, p. 30; English: PM, No. 31, p. 37.
“Munajat,” No. 176, p. 180; English: PM, No. 176, p. 268.
“MA,” volume IV, p. 26.

as a good in itself. He hopes that he will be regarded as benevolent, and loves it when other persons
mention his benevolence. That is what Baha’u’llah has called “the barrier of names”. It is caused by
our forgetting that the names and qualities belong only to God. Total union with the divine will
requires the forgetfulness of all our own qualities. It is the meaning of true modesty.

6. The Kingdom of the visible and the invisible

We have seen that every divine Name, every attribute, forms in itself a Malakut. Some have said that
every Name and every attribute forms a Malakut in the interior of every human being, such that
every human being has a Malakut or Malakuts which are his own. This appears in an interesting
commentary by 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari in his book “Qamus-i-Iqan”, a combination of
commentary and dictionary in Persian on the “Book of Certitude” (Kitab-i-Iqan). The commentary
was written in relation to the expression “the Kingdom of the Visible and the Invisible (Malakut-i-
ghayb va shahadat)” which is a Persian lexical variant of the Arabic expression that we have cited

earlier—”Malakut al-ghayb wa'l-shuhud”. The Persian term “shahadat” (Arabic: shahada) is an expression which has a certain currency, in particular with al-Ghazali. The word is of typical usage among the “mutakalimin” and the Neoplatonic philosophers and it derives from the Arabic translation of certain Greek philosophical works. In the corpus of this Hellenistic philosophy, this word has a very particular meaning, referring to the Platonic distinction between the “sensible (shahada, shuhud)” and the “intelligible(ghayb)”.243 The term “ghayb” signifies “hidden, invisible or secret”. Sometimes the World of Ghayb ('alam al-ghayb) is designated as “the world of mystery.”

Ishraq-Khavari begins by citing the text of the “Tablet to Varqa” to which we referred earlier. He then expands upon the meaning of the expression “Most Great Manifestation” (manzar-i-akbar), saying that Baha’u’llah designates himself therewith. Then he defines the World of Ghayb as the world of “Intelligences” ('uqul) and of “spiritual realities” (haqa'iq), and the world of shahadat as the world of Nasut and the world of the “physical bodies” (jismaniyyat). The introduction of the word “Intelligences” ('uqul) seems here doubtful inasmuch as this word does not appear in the works of Baha’u’llah with this meaning. ‘Abdu’l-Baha speaks sometimes of “maqulih”, from the same root, which designates either the product of human reason ('aql) or concepts apprehendable by human reason. Ishraq-Khavari appears here to be relying upon the Muslim philosophical tradition of Ibn Sina, which is why we approach what he has written with reserve.

After these preliminaries, Ishraq-Khavari elaborates the idea that there exists a Malakut belonging to each individual. It is interesting to cite in extenso this rather curious text:

“Every human being must develop the qualities (istidad) which are deposited in his nature (sirisht) so that they may find a way to become manifest in the World of shahadat. These perfections, which are in limited quantity within him, form his own Malakut which must pass through all the degrees of his development until man attains the rank of perfection (maqam-i-

This distinction comes from the “Pseudo-Theology of Aristotle”; in reality a compilation from the

“Enneads” of Plotinus to which were added Proclusian elements which associate the change of domain to
sensible things, and immortality and permanence to intelligible realities. This distinction is not made by
Plato, who insists more upon the unity of the sensible and intelligible worlds, thus agreeing with Bahá’u’lláh
for whom the created world constitutes one reality.

kamal) which is concealed in him (dar ghayb) as the fruit is concealed in the tree. When the
tree, before the fruit appears, finds the way of its own perfection, then the fruit passes (from
the world) of ghayb of this tree to existence. Thus, when the tree arrives at its own Malakut the
fruit passes from the ghayb to shuhud (from existence in concealment in the intelligible world
to sensible existence) and becomes thus manifest. For every individual there exists a rank of
perfection and a Malakut which is his and which was determined and fixed (by God) and
which must, by the means of the light of existence (nur-i-vujud) which is conferred ('ata) upon
it by the effusions (fayad) of the supreme reality (haqiqi) permit him to traverse progressively
the degrees (darijat) of perfection until he arrives at his Malakut which is the highest degree of
perfection which it is possible for him to attain. He must do so only within the process of his
own development and his own evolution without anything stopping him or interposing itself
between him and it, for otherwise, never will he enter into his Malakut.

“For example, one can say that Malakut, which is the supreme degree of perfection of the
tree, consists in producing a fruit; but if the tree believes that injurious insects are attacking it,
its growth will be stopped and it will not be able to arrive at its degree of perfection which is
the production of the fruit, which is to say that it will not enter into its Malakut. Furthermore,
it can fall from the vegetable rank and descend to the rank of inorganic bodies (jamad). In the
same fashion, man in the course of his own spiritual development towards his Malakut can
follow the same path, as we can understand by analogy. If he succumbs to vices such as

envy, pride or jealousy, these vices will become like injurious insects in the wood which
ruminate and transform it into dead wood; and these regrettable vices, rather that elevating
him towards his Malakut, can make him fall from his human nature (insaniyyat) and debase
him to a rank which is no longer human, that is to say to the rank close to the animal. He
loses thus the elevated station of man and can not enter into his Malakut. To this attests a
saying of the Blessed Beauty which declares in “The Hidden Words”:

“Know, verily, the heart wherein the least remnant of envy yet lingers, shall never attain My
everlasting dominion (jabarut), nor inhale the sweet savors of holiness breathing from My
kingdom (malakut) of sanctity.”244 Consequently, it is clear from this citation that every
individual possesses his own Malakut and that he must endeavour, from this world around
which turn all the other worlds, to purify himself from the blamable vices and from the
influence of disgraceful actions so that the injurious aggressors will be kept far away and his
tree can become green and grow to produce the fruits of human qualities (fada'il) so and that
he enters into the celestial Malakut; this Kingdom in concealment (Malakut-i-ghayb) is within
the reach of everyone. Whoever strives to attain it will enter; otherwise it will escape him.
Consider that the fruit which is the manifestation of the Malakut of the soul was in
concealment (dar ghayb) in the tree at the moment in which the tree was planted and if the
gardener had not had the knowledge and the certitude of the existence of this fruit he would
never have planted this tree...thus as the poet Mawlavi Rumi says it:

If it was not by desire and hope of fruit
Never the gardener would plant the tree.

“Consequently the Malakut which represents the fruit which is the degree of perfection of the
Bahá’u’lláh, Persian Hidden Words, #6.

tree existed in the moment in which it was planted but this existence was but in capacity (dar

ghayb), and it was necessary that it traverse the steps and the specific degrees of the tree towards the fruit so that the secret which was hidden would become manifest. So also man must all his life make efforts to traverse the degrees of existence and to elevate himself to the stations which Baha'u'llah has described in "The Seven Valleys" and many other books."245

We have cited this text because Ishraq-Khavari has been considered one of the greatest Persian commentators on the work of Baha'u'llah, inasmuch as his "Encyclopedia of the Book of Certitude" (Qamus-i-Iqan) was widely read and has had a considerable influence. Nevertheless this text is very representative of the defects of the interpretations of erudite Persians and Arabs who have never undertaken methodical and systematic analysis of their subject. The interpretation of Ishraq-Khavari seems to represent three major defects. First of all, the texts he cites from the work of Baha'u'llah do not establish a strong foundation for his argument. Next, he introduces vocabulary and concepts which are foreign to the Baha'i writings. Finally, his interpretation is not systematic and it confuses the part with the whole.

In support of his interpretation, Ishraq-Khavari cites only one Hidden Word, and this saying certainly affirms that whoever succumbs to envy will not enter Malakut. When we examine the wording, we find that Baha'u'llah actually says "Malakut-i-taqdis-i-man", which is to say "My sanctified Malakut", which means that Malakut belongs only to God, Who does with it as He wishes. Furthermore, we must not neglect the association of Malakut with Jabarut. In this case Jabarut is clearly described as superior to Malakut. For if man can enter into Malakut, from Jabarut he can only receive "the breezes." These "breezes" are one of the terms which is most characteristic of the superior Kingdoms which influence the inferior Kingdoms by emanation. What do these "breezes" (aryah) consist of? It is they which Baha'u'llah describes as "graces" (fuyud) or "confirmations" (ta'yidat). The term "breeze" also served to describe the prophetic inspiration which emanates from Jabarut. In the writings of Baha'u'llah, there is a very strong link

between prophetic or human
inspiration on the one hand, and grace on the other. The purpose of prayer is to attract grace and
divine confirmations, but this often will manifest itself as “an inspiration which directs the believer”
(hidayat), a technical term which is rendered in English by “guidance”, and which is translated into
French, for lack of a better term, by “direction”.

The commentary of Ishraq-Khavari also appears to us to make use of concepts which are foreign to
the Baha’i writings. We have already pointed out the author's definition of the World of Ghayb as the
world of “Intelligences”, a concept fundamentally foreign to the thought of Baha’u’llah. We may
also wonder: what is this “light of existence” which comes to aid man to attain the rank of
perfection? Finally, the idea that there exists a Malakut for each individual is elsewhere suggested in
the thought of Shaykh Ishraq, al-Suhrawardi, and we may ask, in the absence of a larger scriptural
foundation from the Baha’i writings, to what degree Ishraq-Khavari was influenced by his cultural
past and in particular his long association with the Ishraqiyyun before his conversion to the Baha’i
Faith.

On another point, it seems unduely limiting to assimilate the World of Ghayb to a world of potential
because the World of Ghayb includes for example Jabarut. If we define the World of Ghayb as the
world of the “spiritual realities” (haqa'iq), which seems to us the only acceptable definition, then one
Ishraq-Khavari, “Qamus-i-Iqan,” pp. 1527-1531.

certainly cannot say that these spiritual realities are endowed only with virtual existence, that is, of
being in potential. They are much more real than that and their mode of being is not unique. We
will return in another Chapter to the nature of the spiritual realities.

It is clear to the reader, from the contemplation of this one example, the numerous problems of
interpretation brought up by the work of Baha’u’llah. To resolve them broaches the delicate issue of
the adoption of a methodology carefully controlled by hermeneutical and philosophical definition.

Undoubtedly, the philosophical activity of the future Baha'i society will have a completely different basis from the philosophy of today, upon which we are unfortunately still very dependent.

What we have seen heretofore is ample evidence that the word Malakut has multiple meanings in the work of Baha'u'llah. It is not a technical term which has one definition for all contexts and usages. As we have seen, Baha'u'llah seems to have known all the different historical meanings of the terminology of the divine worlds and to have made use of them all, sometimes in the very same Tablet. Sometimes, he utilizes the word Malakut in its Quranic sense, sometimes in its Gospel meaning; sometimes he refers to it as the intellectual world like the "mutakalimin"; sometimes he uses it in the sense of the Imaginal World as among the Ishraqiyyun; sometimes he gives it meanings which are his very own. This clearly denotes the refusal of Baha'u'llah to fix once and for all an entire terminology so that it would be easy to recognize and to define. We find throughout the length of his work semantic slidings, transformations and permutations. The rule that should guide us in our reading is that the context illuminates the word, and the word illuminates the context.

7. Jabarut

What we have said about the vocabulary of Baha'u'llah is particularly true when the word Malakut appears alone. In this case it often has a very broad and multi-faceted meaning, as is likewise the case when it appears in association with another word of the nomenclature of the divine worlds, such as Jabarut for example.

Unlike Malakut, Jabarut rarely appears alone—we find but eight examples in the "Munajat". In most cases, Jabarut seems to be a synonym of Malakut, and there is a simple permutation between the words. It is thus that we find the "Jabarut of Revelation and creation" (Jabarut al-amr wa'l-khalq)246; "Jabarut of the contingent world" (Jabarut al-imkan)247; "Jabarut of Names" (Jabarut al-asma)248.

In other texts, Jabarut takes on a more specific meaning in association with the divine Manifestation.

In this case we come closer to its technical meaning. In a prayer Baha'u'llah describes himself as a

"Munajat," No. 63, p. ?; English: PM, No. 63, p. 102. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: "the realms of revelation and of creation". "Munajat," No. 80, p. 93; English: PM, No. 80, p. 133. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: "the heaven of Thy Revelation and the kingdom of Thy creation". "Munajat," No. 179, p. 206; English: PM, No. 179, p. 308. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: "the kingdoms of Thy revelation and of Thy creation".
"Munajat," No. 114, p. 132; English: PM, No. 114, p. 195. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: "the lordship of all things".
"Munajat," No. 177, p. 194; English: PM, No. 177, p. 291. Shoghi Effendi translates this as: "the kingdom of Thy names". "Munajat," No. 189, p. 126.

prisoner and asks God to deliver him "that I may soar on the wings of detachment towards the loftiest summits (Jabarut) of Thy creation (ikhtira')."249 In another text, He speaks of "Jabarut of decree (qada)" which is precisely the technical meaning of Jabarut which we have described in Chapter II. "Jabarut al-Qada"250 designates the place from which "the Celestial Dove" or "the Heavenly Nightingale" sing their melody.251 We are thus in the world of the divine Manifestation, and it is particularly interesting and altogether in conformity with his metaphysic that Baha'u'llah takes up here the tradition of 'Abdu'r-Razzaq Kashani, by associating the world of decree with the world of the Manifestation. In another text consecrated to the Bab, Baha'u'llah says:

"I yield Thee such thanks as can cause the Nightingale of Glory ('andalib al-baha') to pour forth its melody in the highest heaven (jabarut al-'ama)..."252

This is one of the numerous examples in which Baha'u'llah, in his prayers, disassociates his terrestrial person from his Manifestation in the spiritual world, and establishes a dialogue between himself as Manifestation in the sensible world and himself as Manifestation in the spiritual world.
Shoghi Effendi has not attempted to translate the term "'ama" which is

truly difficult to render, and
which is a semi-synonym of “ghayb”, that is to say “invisible”,
“intelligible” or “suprasensible”.
Notwithstanding these usages, in most cases Jabarut appears in association with Malakut and they
constitute an inseparable pair, somewhat as in the work of al-Ghazali. We find twenty-one examples
of this in the “Munajat”.

8. Malakut associated with Jabarut

We can distinguish two precise usages of the pair Malakut-Jabarut. In the first usage Malakut precedes
Jabarut in the phrase and this indicates an ontological difference between the two terms, in which
Malakut is clearly an inferior sphere to Jabarut. We see an example of this in this prayer in which
Baha’u’llah says:

“...the souls of Thy servants were stirred up in their longing for Thy Kingdom (Malakut), and
the dwellers of Thy realms253 rushed forth to enter into Thy heavenly dominion (jabarutika).”254

A detailed analysis of the attributes of the pair Malakut-Jabarut might become fastidious so we will
limit ourselves to the most important facts. The attributes which characterize the first member of the
couple are all terms that we have already analyzed. For the second member, there appear only a

“Munajat,” No. 64, p. 74; English: PM, No. 64, p. 103.
PM, No. 96, p. 161: “Malakut al-qada” with “Jabarut taqdir”
“Munajat,” No. 128 [No. 178], p. 197; English: PM, No. 178, p. 295.
“Munajat,” No. 184, p. 220; English: PM, No. 184, p. 330.
The Arabic text says: “man fi'l-bilad”, which Shoghi Effendi translates “the dwellers of Thy realms”.
“Munajat,” No. 38, p. 38; English: PM, No. 38, p. 49. “Bilad” has a very imprecise meaning in Arabic
which literally means “town,” “country,” “district”.
“Jabarutika” was translated by Shoghi Effendi by “Thy heavenly dominion”.

very few new attributes. We find only “elevation/height” (irtifa)255, “grace” (fadl)256, “will”
(mashiyyat)257, “face/countenance” (liq)258. It appears to be difficult to find a vocabulary that is
distinctive to Jabarut. Sometimes Malakut and Jabarut seem to be nothing but

synonymous terms as in
the verses:

“...O Thou Who rulest all things, and in Whose hand is the kingdom of the entire
creation.”259

A literal translation would read: “O Thou between Whose hands is found the Jabarut of creation
(ibda) and the Malakut of invention (ikhtira').” As we have already seen, “ibda” and “ikhtira'“ are
almost synonymous words.

9. The World of Command and imperative theology

More than through the analysis of vocabulary, it is in taking note of context that will enlighten us as
we reconstruct the function of the pair Malakut-Jabarut, and it is here that we discover most of the
characteristics of the two terms in Muslim thought. The expression which is repeated most
frequently is that of “Malakut of the heavens and of the earth” and “Jabarut of Revelation (amr) and of
creation (khalq)”260, which situates Jabarut in a more immaterial sphere than Malakut. The most
important word here is “amr” which Shoghi Effendi translates by “Revelation”. “Amr” signifies in the
first place “command” from the verb “amara”, to command. It also signifies “Cause” in the sense of
the “Cause of God”, “the affair”, “the work”. Revelation, command and Cause are related concepts
in the work of Baha’u’llah.

The word “amr” has such an importance in the work of Baha’u’llah that one might consider that
even as a divine Name implies a veritable theology, there exists a theology of the divine Command,
which we might call imperative theology.

The word “amr” is one of the terms of Qur'anic origin which has a rich philosophical history. The
word appears more than a hundred times in the Qur'an in various contexts. Creation results from

“Munajat,” No. 58, p. 65; English: PM, No. 58, p. 88. Shoghi Effendi translates “Jabarut al-'izza wa'l-irtifa'“
with “the realms of loftiness and grandeur”.

“Munajat,” No. 62, p. 72; English: PM, No. 62, p. 99. Shoghi Effendi translates: “Jabarut al-fadl” as “the
heaven of Thy grace”.

“Munajat,” No. 82, p. 96; English: PM, No. 82, p. 138. Shoghi Effendi

translates: “Jabarut al mashiyyat” with
“the heaven of Thy will”.
“Munajat,” No. 179, p. 202; English: PM, No. 179, p. 302. Shoghi Effendi
translates: “Jabarut liqa'ika” as
“the heaven of Thy presence”. The Arabic “liqa” literally signifies
“face,” “visage” from whence by
extension “to encounter face to face”. It is this term which the Qur'an
employs when it affirms that one day
men will see God face to face. The Bab explained that the expression “the
face of God” refers to the divine
Manifestation.
“Munajat,” No. 96, p. 110; English: PM, No. 96, p. 161.
“Munajat,” No. 28, p. 27; English: PM, No. 24, p. 32. “Munajat,” No.
31, pp. 29-30; English: PM, No. 31,
p. 36. “Munajat,” No. 63, p. 73; English: PM, No. 63, p. 102.
“Munajat,” No. 176, p. 191; English: PM, No.
176, p. 286.

an order of God and it obeys this order. A special order was given to men261 as
to the angels, to Iblis
and to the jinn. The order of God fixes the destiny of man262. It is by His
order that God, through
the intermediary of the Prophets, communicates with men263. The variety of
occurrences of the
term resulted in a rich exegesis. Very early the term also entered into the
language of philosophy.
We find it in the famous “Theology of Aristotle”, that is to say in a
purely Hellenistic context,
although the word has no equivalent in Greek. Certain erudite ones have argued
that this fact
constitutes the proof that the long recension of the “Theology” could not
have been collected except
in an existing Islamic environment based on an original work which is lost
today264. The “Theology
of Aristotle” identifies “amr” with the Verb of God (kalima) and with His
Will (mashiyya) which is itself
described as an intermediary between the Creator and the first Intelligence;
“amr” then is the
efficient cause, and it is for this reason that it is sometimes called “Cause
of causes”.

This conception was adopted thereafter by the Isma'ili and we find it again in
works attributed
(wrongly for certain) to Nasir-i-Khusraw, such as the “Khvan-i-ikhvan” and
the “Zad al-Musafirin”,
despite the fact that these works express fairly contradictory doctrines. For

Nasir-i-Khusraw, “amr” is identical with the creative act (ibda) of God. This induces him to oppose, in his “Jami'a al-Hikmatayn”, including the physical world in the world of “amr”. Nasiri'd-Din Tusi, on the other hand, expresses in his work “Rawdat al-Taslim” a theory of divine knowledge in which Command figures as the noetic apex in which the different faculties culminate in a union between themselves and the divine command. Isma'ili gnosis was transmitted to the Ithna 'Ashari (Twelver) Shi'i and the interpretations of the concept of “amr”, sometimes as the manifestation of the divine will, sometimes as the creative act of God, are numerous in its schools, with subtle variations.265

Sunni thought for the most part is inclined to focus on the question of human responsibility in relation to the divine command. It is here that we find the old debate about predestination. How can man obey an order if God, in advance of his action, has elected the believer and rejected the unbeliever? The Mu'tazili crystalized the debate, in forming their doctrine upon the liberty of man, and by affirming that there must be a necessary connection between the divine command (amr) and the divine will (irada).

The Neoplatonists, on their part, were interested in ontological questions linked to the deployment of the divine Command. They assimilated the word of “amr” to the intelligible world in giving a curious interpretation to a passage from the Qur'an. The Qur'an declares:

Qur'an IV:58,66,77.
God is He Who “fixes destiny by His order”. cf. Qur'an II:210; V:52; VI:8; VII:54; VIII:42,44; IX:106; X:3,31; XI:44,73,94; XII:21,41; XIII:2,31; XIV:24; XVI:1-2; XIX:21,39; XXX:4; XXXII:5; XXXIII:37,38; XL:79; XLI:12; XLV:17-18; LIV:3,12; LXV:12; LXXXII:19; XCVII:4.
Qur'an II:27,63,67-68,222; III:80; IV:58,66,77; V:117; VI:14,71,163; VII:28-29,77; IX:31; X:72,104; XI:112; XII:40; XIII:21,25,36; XV:65-66,94; XVI:50,90; XVII:16; XXI:73; XXIV:63; XXVII:91; XXVIII:24; XXXVII:102; XXXIX:11-12; XL:66; XLII:15; XLIX:9; LI:44; LXV:5,8; LXVI:6; LXXX:23; XCVIII:5; etc.
For a discussion of the “Theology” of Aristotle and its influence, cf. supra chapter IX:9.

On the concept of “amr” in Isma'ilism see Christian Jambet, “La grande Resurrection d'Alamut; les formes de la liberte dans le shi'isme ismaelien,” Paris, 1990, pp. 68, 191-192 in particular.

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“He covers the day and the night which follow one another rapidly; He submits the sun, the moon and the stars to His command (bi-amrihi); the command (amr) and the creation (khalq) do not belong to Him?” Blessed be God, the Lord of the worlds.”266

The commentators among the “falasifa” [Islamic philosophers] interpreted the terms “amr” and “khalq” as referring to distinct ontological spheres being the object of a distinct creation. By “amr” God created the spiritual realities, by “khalq” the material substances.

We rediscover here the famous pair “Amr-khalq” which we have so often encountered from the pen of Baha’u’llah, sometimes associated with Malakut, sometimes with Jabarut, and which in any case has a Qur'anic origin. For Baha’u’llah, “khalq” does not designate the sensible world but the world of man in his double dimension of physical and spiritual which results in the human being belonging as much to the sphere of Malakut as to the sphere of Mulk, and from whence the ambiguity of a concept like Nasut to describe human nature. “Amr” refers to the divine manifestation. The ontological sphere of “amr” penetrates all the divine worlds from Lahut to the physical world. “Amr” is the expression of the attributes of the divine Manifestation Himself. At the level of Lahut, it is assimilated to the Verb or to the universal Manifestation (mazhar-i-kulli). Command (amr) is thus the creative act par excellence originating in the “Kun!” (Be!).267 It is also the Verb or the Holy Spirit in their creative aspect. It is in this sense that one can interpret the passage of the Apostle Paul who attributes the creation to Christ acting as Logos. This Logos is nothing other than the universal Manifestation, which serves as the channel of Command. Jesus was but a particular manifestation of this universal Manifestation, which is why in every Dispensation one can attribute creation to the divine messenger who becomes the particular channel of Command and of the expression of the divine

will.

At the level of Jabarut, “amr” takes the form of divine Revelation. It is for this reason that Shoghi Effendi translates “al-amr wa'l-khalq” by “Revelation and creation”, and in this way establishes the ontological link which exists between the two. It does not refer only to the fact that it is the Verb which created the world, but that Revelation, in the sense of the “Mother-Book” and the “preserved Tablet” contains all the spiritual laws, and thus is not only the guarantor of the order and stability of the world, but in fact constitutes the very cause of its existence.

We see here that the concept of “amr” in the writings of Baha’u’llah is rather distant from the Muslim concept, and is perfectly coherent with his treatment of the divine worlds. In fact, we find him employing always the same procedure, that of applying what Islam says about God to the Divine Manifestation. For Baha’u’llah, God is an unknowable Essence. We can not discuss Hahut. The vision of man is limited to the sensible world and to Malakut. He does not comprehend the superior spheres except through the divine Manifestations. From Jabarut he receives only the “breaths” and the “breezes”. Indeed, the ontology of Baha’u’llah can be reduced to three essential spheres: the sphere of the divine Essence, which is impenetrable; the sphere of the divine Manifestation; and the sphere of man or of creation as a whole. We will return to this subject.

Qur'an VII:53. [yughshiy al-layla an-nahara yaTlubuhun hathiythan wa'l-shmsa wa'l-qamara wa'l-nujuwma musakharatin biamrihi ala lahu al-khalqu wa'l-amru tibaraka allah rabbu al-'alamina]
Qur'an 36:82.

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In conclusion, associated with Jabarut we find terms which pertain to Revelation (amr), to divine power (taqdir), to grace (fadl), and finally, to the Countenance (liqa) of God, which is to say the divine Manifestation at the level of Jabarut or Lahut. All of these terms are related to one another in the work of Baha’u’llah. They characterize the power ('izza) which is the principal attribute of the

Manifestation and of Jabarut. Jabarut is manifested to men through the personality of the divine
Manifestation and through the divine Verb which is incarnated in his writings. Baha'u'llah speaks of
"the dominion of utterance" (Jabarut al-ayyat)268.

If the pair Malakut-Jabarut appear together with extreme frequency, the same is true of other terms
such as Mulk, Nasut, Lahut and Hahut.

10. The World of Mulk

Mulk appears only rarely in the writings of Baha'u'llah, and when it does appear it appears not to
have a very specific meaning, unlike in the case of 'Abdu'l-Baha in which is clearly designates the
sensible world. Most often, for Baha'u'llah Mulk designates the earth in a very prosaic sense. It is
therefore synonymous with Mamlaka which refers to the terrestrial kingdoms. Mamlakat signifies the
country, or the land populated with believers and infidels. In this way we understand the phrase:

"Submit to Thy power, by Thy Name the Conqueror, the peoples of Thy domain (mamlaka)
so that they will turn towards Thy Countenance."269

Mamlaka has a quasi-political meaning, for it contrasts the government of men to the government of
God, obedience to human powers and passions in contrast to obedience to God. Sometimes, Mulk
has an abstract meaning that designates the sphere of the power of God as in the verse:

"...so that from the land (mulk) wherein they dwell no voice may be heard except the voice
that extolleth Thy mercifulness and might..."270

11. The superior Worlds

The term Hahut appears only exceptionally in the writings of Baha'u'llah and then in those rare
occasions when he has formulated the theory of the five presences/worlds. In most cases,
Baha'u'llah ends his citation of that theory with the world of Lahut.

In "Munajat", we find only one mention of the trilogy Mulk-Malakut-Jabarut:

"Lo, the All-Possessing (malik) is come. Earth (mulk) and heaven (malakut), glory ('izza) and
dominion (jabarut) are God's, the Lord [mawla] of all men, and the Possessor [malik] of the

“Munajat,” No. 38, p. 41; English: PM, No. 38, p. 53. Shoghi Effendi translates “Jabarut al-ayyat” by “the dominion of utterance”.
“Munajat,” No. 38, p. 85. The examples being innumerable we will leave off citing them here.
“Munajat,” No. 58, p. 66; English: PM, No. 58, p. 89.

Throne on high ['arsh] and of earth below [ithara]!”271

We see the term “'izza” (power, majesty, glory) here as an essential attribute of Jabarut.

If it is rare to see Baha’u’llah cite the five presences, it is less uncommon to see him cite the first four worlds. We give here three examples:

“Cast upon this poor (faqir) and desolate creature, O my Lord, the glance of Thy wealth, and flood his heart (qalb) with the beams (nur) of Thy knowledge (ma'rifa), that he may apprehend the verities (haqa'iq) of the unseen world (Lahut), and discover the mysteries (asrar) of Thy heavenly realm (Jabarut), and perceive the signs and tokens (zuhurat) of Thy kingdom (Malakut) and contemplate the manifold revelations (shu'unat) of this earthly life (Nasut) all set forth before the face of Him Who is the Revealer of Thine Own Self.”272

It is probable that the Western reader will recognize that this text takes on an entirely different dimension now that he is familiar with the names of the presences/worlds.

Another example is particularly interesting for the wealth of its metaphysical contents:

“I testify that no sooner had the First Word (kalima) proceeded, through the potency of Thy will (mashiyya) and purpose (irada), out of His mouth, and the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on the earth were stirred to the depths. Through that Word the realities of all created things (haqa'iq al-wujuud) were shaken, were divided, separated, scattered, combined and reunited, disclosing, in both the contingent world (Mulk) and the heavenly kingdom (Malakut), the entities of a new creation (takwin)273, and revealing, in the unseen realms

(Jabarut, Lahut), the signs and tokens of Thy unity and oneness."274

Finally, the best known example is found in "The Seven Valleys". In the Valley of Unity [tawhid],

English: PM, No. 182, p. 315. We see in this translation of the word "Jabarut" that Shoghi Effendi has
sustained the original meaning of the Aramaic "gebura" which is actually a synonym of the Arabic "'izza".
The Arabic text of the Medium Obligatory Prayer is found in "Munajat," No. 182, p. 210.
"Munajat," No. 38, p. 40; English: PM, No. 38, pp. 52-53.
The word "takwin" designates the creative act of God. The text says literally: "the word of the creative act
(takwin) was manifested." In Quranic exegesis "takwin" designates the production of the corruptible being.
The word derives from the root KWN which means "to be". The verb "kawwana" signifies "to constitute a
being which can be generated". It explicitly aims at the divine order "kun!" (be!) which corresponds to the
"fiat!" of the Bible. "Takwin" is thus an act of speech for it is by speech that God created the world. This
speech, or rather this Verb is for Bahá'u'lláh an aspect of the Spirit emanating from the divine Essence.
"Munajat," No. 178, p. ?; English: No. 178, p. 295. Shoghi Effendi translates this last phrase in these words:
"…and revealing, in the world of Jabarut the manifestations (zuhurat) of unity (wahidiyya), and causing to
appear the signs (ayyat) of unity (ahadiyya) in Lahut." The English expression "unseen realms" translates
Jabarut as well as Lahut which in this context are impossible to distinguish. This clearly shows that Shoghi
Effendi considered it impossible to convey through translation the allusions contained in the original
terminology, which would, in any case, be unrecognizable or superfluous for the greater part of Western
readers.

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Baha'u'llah enters upon the question of the spiritual worlds:

"Although the divine worlds be never ending, yet some refer to them as four (rutbih): The
world of time (zaman), which is the one that hath both a beginning and an end; the world
of duration (dahr), which hath a beginning, but whose end is not revealed; the world of
perpetuity (sarmad), whose beginning is not to be seen but which is known to

have an end;
and the world of eternity (azal), neither a beginning nor an end of which is visible.
Although there are many differing statements as to these points, to recount them in detail
would result in weariness. Thus, some have said that the world of perpetuity (sarmad) hath
neither beginning nor end, and have named the world of eternity (azal) as the invisible,
impregnable Empyrean (ghayb). Others have called these the worlds of the Heavenly
Court (Lahut), of the Empyrean Heaven (Jabarut), of the Kingdom of the Angels (Malakut),
and of the mortal world (Nasut).275

"The journeys in the pathway of love are reckoned as four276: From the creatures to the
True One; from the True One to the creatures; from the creatures to the creatures; from
the True One to the True One.

"There is many an utterance of the mystic seers and doctors of former times which I have
not mentioned here, since I mislike the copious citation from the sayings of the past; for
quotation from the words of others proveth acquired learning, not the divine bestowal.
Even so much as We have quoted here is out of deference to the wont of men and after
the manner of the friends."277

He insists upon the fact that "all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey
beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision."278. It is this statement which we
have called the "phenomenological principle" of Baha'u'llah. We will later return to the discussion
of its importance. If we consider that man cannot elevate himself above Malakut, we must
understand that this statement affirms the essential unity between Malakut and the sensible world
(Mulk), which in itself conforms to everything that we know of the teaching of Baha'u'llah. He also
explains that the differences that we suppose to exist between the different divine Manifestations
originate from the differing perspectives of the human spirit which we are invited and advised to
transcend.

These three texts project interesting views on the four worlds. The first establishes an interesting
correspondence between the terms designating the divine worlds and the deployment of reality. We
find ourselves considering the following scheme:

Lahut.....Spiritual realities (haqa'iq)
Jabarut.....Secrets (asrar)

“The Seven Valleys,” p. 25.
We will re-encounter this question when we study the chapter which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá consecrates to Love in
the “Commentary on the Hidden Treasure” (Tafsir-i kuntu kanzan makhfian).
“The Seven Valleys,” pp. 25-26.
“The Seven Valleys,” p. 18.

Malakut.....Manifestations (zuhurat)
Nasut.....Qualities (shu'unat)

To what degree does this hierarchy correspond to a deployment of being in the framework of a
particular metaphysical conception? We think that we would be in error to give this hierarchy a
metaphysical significance alone, and that, on the contrary, its value is hermeneutical. The
significance of the terms that are employed here, should be understood in a “gnostic” framework;
they constitute the foundations of a theory of knowledge which we will have the opportunity to study
in the second part of this work.

Four ways are open to the knowledge of man, and these four ways, as in the “Tablet of All Food”,
correspond to the four worlds. We will return to these problems, but, in summary, we can say that
man can first of all approach the divine mystery through the contemplation of the material world
(Mulk) which, by its “qualities” (shu'unat) offers him an analogical and homological representation of
the superior worlds. Secondly, he can penetrate the mysteries of the other world, which is to say of
Malakut, thanks to its “manifestations” (zuhurat) because that world is directly in contact with the
material world and we can directly feel its influence. It is for this reason that Shoghi Effendi
translates “zuhurat” by “signs” and “tokens”. In other words, Malakut is manifested in the interior of
the sensible world. Here we are in the domain of natural Religion. Then

thirdly, man can not
elevate himself above this level of knowledge without assistance from the intermediary of the divine
Manifestation, that is to say, a Prophet, and here we enter into the framework of revealed Religion.
The prophetic teaching must be interiorized, and it is only this interiorization which gives access to
the “mysteries of the celestial world”, that is to say to the “secrets of Jabarut”, if we translate literally.
This step can not be taken, as we see in other texts, except through the purification of the heart.
Finally, the fourth and last way, that of Lahut, represents the true gnosis (ma'rifat), the illuminative
knowledge which presents itself to man like a light (nur), like the reflections in himself of the divine
Names and attributes that permit him to “know” through an inner experience the reality of God in
all of His naked reality through “the truths of Thine invisible world”, that is to say the “truths” that,
by means of the Names and attributes, are the expression of the hidden Essence of God.

From the second citation, three things are asserted. The first, is that the creative act (takwin) concerns
only Malakut and Mulk. We may then think that Jabarut is found outside of this process and that the
spirit of the divine Manifestations was not created by the act of “takwin”. It is thereby that it is
affirmed that the divine Manifestations are eternal beings and that one speaks of their pre-existence
or pre-eternity (qidam)279. The second indication which the text furnishes, is that the world of Lahut is
the world of divine unity (ahadiyya) and that the world of Jabarut is that of unicity (wahidiyya). When
we are considering a scheme of four worlds, one which excludes Hahut, a part of the attributes of
Hahut passes over to Lahut. This indicates that we should not give any of the various statements of
Baha’u’llah about the divine worlds the character of an absolute authority, one that would
exhaustive depict reality. All we can know of them is always relative. We will return to this point
when we develop the hermeneutic aspect of the divine worlds and of the writings of Baha’u’llah in
general. The divine worlds appear then to be a pedagogical scheme employed to help us
comprehend various relationships, including: what unicity is in relation to

unity, the names and
attributes of God in relation to the divine Essence, the difference of degree between man and the
Manifestation. The error would consist in us believing that these are concepts which inform us of the
“Lights of Guidance,” New Delhi, 1983, No. 1012, p. 375.

nature of the divine worlds and which permit us to describe them. The divine worlds are beyond all
description. Finally, a third indication is furnished us by the fact that “the realities of all created
things”, for which we would be tempted to utilize the word “essences”, are described as a category
belonging as much to Malakut as to this world below, that is to say to the world of Mulk.

While the first citation situated us in a hermeneutic context, we now find ourselves in a metaphysical
context, which explains why the word “haqa'iq” would be employed with a totally different meaning.
We are no longer in the presence of the “truths” of the divine Essence that divine knowledge effects
to appear to human consciousness, but of the “realities of all created things”. The text says literally
“the realities of being” or “the realities of existence” giving us to understand that the “realities”
(haqa'iq) constitute the diversification of Being which produces “the entities of a new creation”.

The third citation, taken from “The Seven Valleys” does not give information on the divine worlds
as such, but establishes a link between the ontological problem of their existence on the one hand,
and the problem of time and of love on the other. We will not digress by venturing to explain these
links, both of which would necessitate vast research and the conclusions of which would in
themselves require a monograph. We will limit our remarks to two points. The first concerns the
phrase of Baha’u’llah “all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in
the realms of being, proceed from his own vision”. This is what we have called the
“phenomenological principle” of Baha’u’llah. Of course, by “realms of being” Baha’u’llah may be
referring to the “seven valleys”, but there we take it to indicate that this phrase should be accorded a

more general import. In other words, reality can always be described from various points of view,
and that which we discover depends necessarily upon the position and perspective of the observer.
Thus the thought of Baha'u'llah expresses itself always in a relative manner. Man cannot arrive at a
totally objective knowledge of reality. Reality always presents itself to man in the form of "degree",
and hence we can speak of different levels of profundity; furthermore, the more we seek to descend
into these profundities the more our modes of knowledge are confirmed as inadequate. In this way,
we see as one what is multiple and what is multiple what is one.

The second important point of this text is located in the justification given by Baha'u'llah for the
employment of this terminology and for making reference to old theories, both of which have as
their aim to show "deference to the wont of men and after the manner of the friends". Baha'u'llah
manifestly distances himself from what might otherwise constitute a rigid interpretation of these
metaphysical speculations.

12. Hahut and Lahut and the problem of the divine attributes

We may wonder why Hahut so rarely occurs in the writings of Baha'u'llah. The examples of the
divine worlds that we have cited earlier have often referred to three worlds, sometimes to four
appear, and very rarely five. In all cases when one of the worlds is omitted, it is Hahut that
disappears. We may thus question the validity of positing a distinction between Hahut and Lahut.

Until now, we have limited ourselves to stating the facts according to what is found in the writings of
Baha'u'llah. We will now discuss the consequences of these observations at the level of metaphysics.
In order to do this we must once again take leave of our standard definitions. We have seen that
Hahut is the world of the unmanifested Essence of God, while Lahut represents the sphere in which

God exists in the deployment of His attributes. Does this distinction have meaning in the thought of
Baha'u'llah? Evidently not. We will see in the following pages that we cannot distinguish between

the Essence of God and His attributes except at the conceptual level, making a distinction that is
purely intellectual, even as it is impossible, except on a purely intellectual level, to distinguish the
attributes of God from one another. The distinction that we establish between these attributes, is
thus a distinction which is governed by human language. However, language is not reality.
Consequently, it is impossible, other than on a purely conceptual level to distinguish between Hahut
and Lahut. When Baha'u'llah has recourse to these expressions it is in a purely allegorical manner
having a hermeneutical purpose.

CHAPTER SIX:
THE DIVINE WORLDS AS THEOPHANY

1. Theophanic hierarchy and ontological theophany

The previous Chapters have introduced us to the hermeneutic value of the divine worlds in the
writings of Baha'u'llah. Now we will we add a theophanic value that will once again touch upon
metaphysical questions. Every world is in its own manner a mirror of the names and attributes of
God. Consequently, all of creation is a theophany. The hierarchy of the divine worlds is a
theophanic hierarchy, for it is evident that the higher one rises in this hierarchy the more the
reflection of the divine names grows in plenitude. The intelligibility of these worlds diminishes for
man as we travel up this hierarchy because each theophanic level has its own ontological modality,
and man can only understand what is found within the limits of his own ontological horizon.

2. The divine worlds in the Tablet to Varqa

Baha'u'llah explains in the "Tablet of Varqa" that Malakut is the world which is situated between the
human world and the world of Jabarut. This latter realm is the world of Revelation and of the divine
Manifestations. When the divine Verb is manifested in the world of humanity, it brings into this
manifestation all of the potentialities of Jabarut which thereby descend with him to the lower levels of
creation. Thus this divine speech (bayan) has the power to manifest the superior worlds which are,
according to this Tablet, the world of Will (mashiyyat), the world of divine

Volition (iradih), the world
of Power (qadar), the world of decree (qada), the world of Eternity which has no beginning (azal), the
world of Eternity which has no end (sarmad), the world of the Aeon which has neither beginning nor
end (dahr), and finally, the world of Time (zaman).280

Baha'u'llah utilizes a series of terms each of which has a specific meaning in Islamic philosophy. To
each, he assigns a "world," that is to say an ontological category. The question for us is to know how
to situate these ontological categories in the Baha'i metaphysic. In order to take this step, we are

"Lawh-i-Varqa".

obliged to start from the conventional meaning of this terminology as it was understood by Muslim
philosophers during the lifetime of Baha'u'llah. But everything we know of the thought of
Baha'u'llah indicates that it is improbable he would have allowed himself to be limited in the
expression of his ideas by the contemporary meanings attached to these terms. On the contrary,
everything we have experienced so far convinces us that the true meaning of this terminology can
not be understood except by making a detailed study of this text by situating it in the context of the
overall metaphysic of Baha'u'llah.

What we clearly discern from the "Tablet of Varqa" is that the worlds cited above are all situated
above Malakut, and this is because the Tablet explains that the function of Malakut is to serve as the
mediator, the transmitter of the influences of these worlds to the human and physical world. If we
examine the ontological categories more closely, we perceive that they are easily arranged in two
series. We find three terms all of which proceed from the divine power—they are "mashiyyat" (will),
"iradih" (volition) and "qadar" (decree). We then find four terms which are concerned with time but
which, in context, must also be linked to the divine power. They are the terms of pre-existence (azal),
of sempiternity (sarmad), of Aeon (dahr) and of time (zaman).

The first category of terms falls within the domain of divine Omnipotence. Of these, decree poses

the least number of problems. Decree is that which actualizes the divine Will: it is its fruit and its result. We have already seen how the divine decrees are registered in the preserved Tablet which is the matrix of revelation. In the scale of divine Omnipotence, decree is closest to the world of Revelation, which is also the world of Command (amr). Hence there exists a certain link between decree and Jabarut. Decree supposes that there is some matter to decree, in the same manner that one cannot imagine a king without a subject, a legislator without legislation. The divine decree presupposes the existence of the world. Decree can be general and it can be particular, in the same fashion that when a legislator legislates, he begins with setting forth general principles before arriving at particular cases. In the same fashion, divine decree is the organizer of the cosmos, but it is not the cause thereof.

This brief description permits us to grasp the difference that exists between the divine decree and the different forms of the divine Will. The divine decree is ontologically situated as the result of the divine Will.

3. The Primal Will

In the sequence cited and prior to divine decree, Baha'u'llah speaks of the world of the Will (mashiyyat) and of the world of Volition (iradih). The distinction which we establish here between "Will" and "Volition" is, in English, purely artificial. It permits us to distinguish between two Arabic words which do not have exact equivalents in English. One may ask if the distinction between "mashiyyat" and "iradih" is significant in the framework of the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah. "Mashiyyat" certainly has a much more precise content in the writings of Baha'u'llah than "iradih" which seems to be employed in a more relaxed manner.

"Mashiyyat" is a term that was borrowed by Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i from the Arab Peripatetic [Aristotelian] philosophy, which speaks of "Primal Will" (al-mashiyyat al-awwaliyya). The Primal Will is one of the names which is generally given in Islamic metaphysics to the first emanation from God.

Other philosophers have proposed to give this name to the movement whereby the divine Essence
gave birth to this first emanation. The Bab made extensive use of this word, by which he sometimes
designated himself. ‘Abdu’l-Baha employs the term in the same context in the “Tafsir”. The word
thus comes to us charged with a substantial past life. It seems that Baha’u’llah does not employ as
much to express his own philosophy as to establish a link between his thought and the philosophy
which was taught in the Islamic schools of theology. It is probable that he gives it a new meaning the
definition of which we will seek to discover.

In the writings of Baha’u’llah, the expression “Primal Will” refers to the Holy Spirit. It is in some
cases a synonym and in others a precise term describing a particular aspect of the Holy Spirit, that
is, the Holy Spirit as manifestation of the divine Will. We will see later that the Holy Spirit has two
aspects: one as Will, the other as divine Love, and that Love is the first cause of creation.

The Primal Will incarnates the primordial aspect of the Holy Spirit which is destined to descend
into all the worlds of God and which is also the expression of divine Omnipotence. It is this Primal
Will permits the Holy Spirit to be the creator of the created world. ‘Abdu’l-Baha gave a precise
definition of the Primal Will in “Some Answered Questions”. He writes in the same chapter in
which he establishes the difference between Manifestation and Emanation:

“Therefore all creatures emanate from God; that is to say, it is by God that all things are
realized, and by Him that all beings have attained to existence. The first thing which
emanated from God is that universal reality, which the ancient philosophers termed the
'First Mind,' and which the people of Baha' call the 'First Will.' This emanation, in that
which concerns its action in the world of God, is not limited by time or place; it is without
beginning or end; beginning and end in relation to God are one. The pre-existence of God is
the pre-existence of essence, and also pre-existence of time, and the phenomenality of

contingency is essential and not temporal...

“Though the 'First Mind' is without beginning, it does not become a sharer in the pre-
existence of God, for the existence of the universal reality in relation to the existence of God
is nothingness, and it has not the power to become an associate of God and like unto Him in
pre-existence.”281

This text is particularly explicit. The Primal Will appears here as the first emanation. Later we will
explore what this concept signifies in Baha’i metaphysics. But the fact that this is an emanation and
not a manifestation signifies that the Primal Will represents the first element of differentiation in the
cosmos. It is the first being, the first existence, distinct from God, but at the same time it is pure
divine Will, that is to say that this differentiation is purely existential.
This is what ‘Abdu’l-Baha
underlines in saying that the Primal Will has no existence independent from the Essence of God.
Another interesting point in this chapter is his link between the ontological problem of the Primal
Will and the varieties of time. The existence of the Primal Will is situated within the sphere of divine
eternity, which we identify with the world of the Aeon, that is to say a time outside of time which has
no duration, where, as ‘Abdu’l-Baha says, the beginning and the end make no difference.

'Ali-Murad Davudi, in his book “Divinity and Manifestation” (Uluviyyat va Mazhariyyat) offered
“Some Answered Questions,” LIII, pp. 237-238.

another formulation of the Primal Will which we cite here with great circumspection, one which
refers to the existence of things in the thought of God. This appears to us to represent an interesting
image upon the purely metaphorical and hermeneutic level, but which it may be imprudent to
transpose this formulation to the ontological level to the extent that we have not found sanction for
this perception in the writings of Baha’u’llah.

Davudi begins his argument by explaining that the Primal Will belongs to the world of revelation
(amr) and that it plays an intermediary role between God and creation. He says

that all beings are
the products of this Primal Will and not the manifestations of the inaccessible Essence (huviyyat-i-
ghaybiyyih) of God. Then he continues by proposing an image which appears to be very much
influenced by Islamic Neoplatonism and in particular the philosophy of Ibn Sina. Before an artisan
has created an object, this object must exist in his intellect ('aql). This means that the form of the
thing pre-exists in the intellect of the artisan. He concludes from this that the world must have
existed first in the thought of the Creator and that it is thus this thought, serving as intermediary
between the Creator and His creation, which is the Primal Will. Thus, the form in the thought of
God would constitute its interior (batin) reality while its sensible realization would be its manifestation
in the world of creation.

What appears troublesome to us in the image employed by Davudi, is that he appropriates the
Aristotelian distinction between form and matter, a distinction we would qualify as purely
intellectual and without a real ontological foundation. Conversely, Baha'u'llah seems to indicates
that the Primal Will expresses an aspect of the divine Verb which tends to include the first moment
of the differentiation between the divine Essence and its emanation. It is in this sense that the notion
of the Primal Will is narrower and more precise than that of the divine Verb. The Primal Will is at
the origin of the creation, and it is an aspect of the Verb, but it is the Verb which descends into the
different worlds of God. Otherwise said, the Primal Will expresses the aspect of the divine Verb in
the most elevated ontological level, which is that realm which is the closest to the divine Essence and
it is this aspect which signals the first instance of its differentiation.

4. Volition, Might and Power

We will not seek to encompass with so much precision the world of the divine Volition, for it
appears to be impossible to do so in the actual state of our knowledge, and besides to be altogether
secondary in the thought of Baha'u'llah. The concept of "irada" belongs to Muslim theology, and in
particular to the Mu'tazili, who make it one of the attributes of God.

“Irada” seems then to be
Islamic counterpart of the Hellenistic concept of “mashiyyat” and that
perhaps explains the
differences in the contents of these two terms.

In the “Tablet of Varqa” Baha’u’llah cites “iradih” between
“mashiyyat” and “qadar” (decree). He
appears to give it an intermediary status between these two concepts. Volition
(Iradih) would be thus
the intermediary step which assures transition between the first emanation and
the actualization of
the divine decrees. However, in actuality this concept plays only a minimal
role in the metaphysic of
Baha’u’llah. One must understand that the world itself is the expression of
divine Omnipotence and
hence of the Will of God. This Omnipotence penetrates all the divine worlds and
in each of these
worlds, it takes an appropriate form. In the world of Revelation, it appears in
the aspects of
“mashiyyat,” “iradih” and “qadar”; in the world of creation in the
form of “qudrat” (might) and

“quwwat” (power), two other expressions which we also find from the pen of
Baha’u’llah. These latter
two are essential attributes of the divine Manifestation. In a prayer found in
“Munajat” Baha’u’llah
declares:

“I give praise to Thee, O my God, that Thou hast chosen me out of all Thy
creatures, and
made me to be the Day-Spring of Thy strength (matla'a quwwatika) and the
Manifestation of
Thy might (mazhara qudratika), and empowered me to reveal282 such of Thy signs
and such
tokens of Thy majesty and power (iqtidar) as none, whether in Thy heaven or on
Thy earth,
can produce.”283

This capacity and this power are the actualization at the level of the world of
humanity of the Will,
the Volition and the Decree which exist at the level of the world of
Revelation. In the same text,
Baha’u’llah speaks of the “heaven of Thy Will (mashiyyat)” in relation
to the “might” (qudrat) of the
Manifestation of which men are unaware.284 Thus this “might” proceeds from
the “heaven of Thy
Will”. It is, at the created level, the manifestation of the same force. In

another prayer, Baha'u'llah
makes the same association in speaking of the unity of the divine
Manifestations. He declares that
manifest through the divine Manifestation is that which God wished (aradtahu)
by His volition (irada)
and that which He ordained (qaddartahu) by His "irrevocable purpose"
(taqdir).285 The English
translation of Shoghi Effendi says, speaking of Moses:

"At one time, Thou didst raise Him up, O my God, and didst attire Him with
the ornament
of the name of Him Who conversed with Thee (Moses), and didst through Him
uncover all
that Thy will (irada) had decreed (aradtahu) and Thine irrevocable purpose
(taqdir) ordained
(qaddartahu)."286

In the same manner, he writes:

"At another time, Thou didst adorn Him with the name of Him Who was Thy
Spirit (Jesus),
and didst send Him down out of the heaven of Thy will (sama'u
mashiyyatika)..."287

In many other places, Baha'u'llah indicates that all the divine
Manifestations have descended from
the "heaven of Will," and indicates that this "Will" is a particular
expression of the Holy Spirit. In
this sense, "might" and "power" which return untiringly as essential
attributes of the Manifestations
are in effect the garments which clothe the Holy Spirit in the world of
creation. This shows that in
the thought of Baha'u'llah the role of the Holy Spirit is far from limited
to being the inspirer of the
prophets, that it represents the active force of Revelation as conceived in its
largest sense, that is to
say, the force which intervenes in all the levels of the created world, from
Malakut to the human
world, and including in the unfolding of human history. Baha'u'llah also
speaks of the "breezes"

Literally this is: "Thou hast manifested from me" (azharta minni).
"Munajat," No. 36, p. 36; English: PM, No. 36, p. 46.
"Munajat," No. 36, p. 36; English: PM, No. 36, p. 47.
"Munajat," No. 38, p. 39; English: PM, No. 38, p. 50.
286Ibid.

287Ibid.

which blow from the World of “Mashiyyat”288 which are the origin of the movement which animates
the divine Manifestations in such manner that they have no other will (mashiyyat) nor any other
volition (iradat) than the Will and Volition of God. In another of his prayers, Baha’u’llah makes the
Will (mashiyyat) an attribute of Jabarut289. We have already seen that Jabarut is also the world of decree
(qadar or taqdir), and these associations demonstrate that in the technical vocabulary of Baha’u’llah,
Jabarut tends to be identified with the world of Revelation ('alam-i-amr).

5. The archetypes of time

We will not attempt here to reconstruct a theory of Time according to the writings of Baha’u’llah.
Such a reconstruction, if it were possible, would take us too far from our purpose. We will therefore
restrict ourselves to underlining certain characteristics of time in the Baha’i writings.

Western translators always have difficulties with translating Arabic terms which describe the
different aspects of time in Islamic texts, and for good cause, because these distinctions are
completely foreign to modern philosophy. Also the reader should not be perturbed if our attempt to
translate this terminology appears to be altogether arbitrary. It is for this reason that it is sometimes
preferable to refer to the Arabic terms.

Firstly let us say that the conception of time in the Baha’i writings is always relative to our
understanding. We find multiple texts which affirm that the time which is known to human
experience, whether that be empirical time which clocks measure or the psychological time which is
formed in the subjectivity of our consciousness, has existence only in the physical world (nasut). This
does not necessarily mean that time as we know it is an illusion. Time is rather a limitation (hadd). In
numerous places, ‘Abdu’l-Baha affirms that the spiritual worlds, beginning with Malakut, are
sanctified from time. In one of his Tablets, he declares that all the spiritual realities (haqa'iq-i-
mujaradih) are sanctified as from every notion of space and time, for space and time are
characteristics which belong to physical realities290. In another Tablet, he declares that the worlds of

Mercy ('alam al-rahmani) and the divine (lahutiyya) stations (maqamat) of sovereignty (rububiyya) are
outside of time. To this statement he appends an explanation that in these higher worlds, there is a
unicity of the moment and that this unicity of the moment contains the past, the present and the
future. To these spiritual realms he cites the terms of eternity (abad), of sempiternity (sarmad), and of
Aeon (dahr). In these divine worlds, the beginning coincides with the end291.

It is particularly interesting to find that in the “Tablet of Varqa” Baha’u’llah seems to establish a link
between the specific archetypes of time and particular divine worlds. This moreover appears to be
altogether coherent with what we know of the spiritual worlds. Every world is characterized with a

“Munajat,” No. 66, p. 77; English: PM, No. 66, p. 108. The Arabic text: “Ay rabbi! Laysa li min iradatin ila
iradatika wa la li min mashiyyatin ila bi-mashiyyatika”, and later: “wa ma taharraktu ila bi-aryahi mashiyyatika.” The
English translation of this passage by Shoghi Effendi reads: “I have no will but Thy will, O my Lord, and
cherish no desire except Thy desire...I am stirred by nothing else except the winds of Thy will...”
“Munajat,” No. 82, p. 96; English: PM, No. 82, p. 138.
“Makatib,” volume I, p. 458.
“Makatib,” volume I, p. 58.

differentiated manifestation of the Spirit and therefore each of these worlds corresponds to a specific
ontological category. In this system, the different archetypes of Time would appear as linked to these
ontological categories. To every level of realities there corresponds a category of duration. We find
that in all the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Baha the notion of time is linked to the notion of space. Obviously,
if we omitted from our world three of its four dimensions, the remaining dimension would seem, if
in any case the human spirit could understand it, to be altogether something else. Time cannot be
conceived outside of space.

If we affirm that the spiritual worlds are outside space and time, we affirm at the same blow that
they are inaccessible to the human intellect and to our current language, for the human intellect can

not understand anything without giving it a representation in three dimensions and without situating
it upon the arrow of time. That is due to the fact that our conception of causality is intimately linked
to our experience of space and time. Time serves to express that which is second in relation to that
which is first, while in the world of Revelation, as ‘Abdu’l-Baha says, the beginning coincides with
the end. The spiritual worlds are worlds in which the links of causality and the relations between the
realities exist outside of all temporal relationship.

What we know about the manner in which Baha’u’llah writes causes us to think that it must be
impossible to associate any of the archetypes of time (azal, abad, sarmad, zaman) to a world or to any
other precise ontological category. This follows from what we have observed about ‘Abdu’l-Baha's
discussion on the limits of human perception. If the divine worlds are inaccessible to the human
intellect, then it is the same for the temporal category which is associated with each of them. The
archetypes of time which we find in the writings of Baha’u’llah are sometimes listed as four,
sometimes five, depending on whether or not “abad” is differentiated from “azal”. But it is probable,
that if one had asked Baha’u’llah to enumerate the archetypes of time, he would have replied that
the archetypes can be considered infinite in number and that they can all be reduced to a single
archetype. It is best then not to place too much importance in the distinctions which have been
established between these archetypes or the particulars in their definitions. We will restrict ourselves
therefore to recall some facts which emphasize the relations between the archetypes of time and the
question of the ontology of the divine worlds.

In his book “Seven Valleys” Baha’u’llah writes:

“On this same basis, ponder likewise the differences among the worlds. Although the divine
worlds be never ending, yet some refer to them as four: The world of time (zaman), which is
the one that hath both a beginning and an end; the world of duration (dahr), which hath a
beginning, but whose end is not revealed; the world of perpetuity (sarmad), whose beginning

is not to be seen but which is known to have an end; and the world of eternity (azal), neither
a beginning nor an end of which is visible. Although there are many differing statements as
to these points, to recount them in detail would result in weariness. Thus, some have said
that the world of perpetuity [sarmad] hath neither beginning nor end, and have named the
world of eternity [azal] as the invisible, impregnable Empyrean."292

Here we find that Baha'u'llah himself underlines the imprecision of the philosophical terminology.
In fact, it is stated, the meaning attached by him through the employment of this terminology
"Athar-i-Qalam-i-A'la," volume III; "The Seven Valleys," p. 25.

fluctuates in each usage by his pen. It is thus in each case that in its own context one must seek for
the explanation.

If for the moment we speak of the four archetypes of time they will be: that which has no beginning
nor end; that which has a beginning but no end; that which has no beginning but an end; finally,
that which has a beginning and an end. This is a classical distinction derived from Sufi literature. It
is its provenance that requires that we read this part of his exposition with the greatest reserve and
refrain from attributing this formulation to Baha'u'llah himself. Following the reference to these
archetypes, the Persian text speaks of the "contradictions" or the "opposing views" (ikhtilaf) which
characterize this theory. Finally, Baha'u'llah does not seem to accord much importance to this
subject because he declares that to enter into the subtleties of this question would risk wearying the
reader. This kind of remark generally expresses a certain disapproval which envisions the quibbles
which theologians will not fail to raise in response to such questions. For Baha'u'llah, it is clear that
human understanding is too limited to bring such problems from obscurity to the light of day.

The reader will hopefully understand that we do not seek here to construct a system having a
complete theory of all things and closed within itself. Our ambition will be limited to clarifying with

precision the meaning of certain terms employed in the Baha'i writings, by taking into account the
fluctuations of terminology which we have already described.

There is a term with which there is no difficulty, the term "zaman". This refers to common time,
including that measured by clocks and psychological time. This dimension of time pertains to the
physical world and more particularly the human world (nasut) which is the only one to have a
consciousness of time. This time is characterized by a beginning and an end and by its aptitude to be
divided and analyzed in its component units.

Contrasted to the world of Nasut is the world of Lahut, that is to say the world of the divine Essence.
It is the world of the invisible (ghayb). In the "Seven Valleys" Baha'u'llah associates this world with
the term "azal" and in other texts with "dahr". Both terms describe a time outside of time, which has
neither duration, beginning, nor end. It is following an ancient tradition that we have chosen to
name this world of time outside of time by utilizing the Greek term "Aeon" so as to distinguish this
Aeon from simple eternity, for eternity implies causality, or rather an anteriority in causes, which is
distinct from the world of the divine Essence which is preceded neither by a cause, nor by an
anteriority. We will return to this question in Chapter IX where we will treat in more detail the
world of the Aeon.

The term "azal" is generally translated by "pre-eternity". We have already encountered the problem
of pre-eternity when, in Chapter II, we discussed the pre-eternity of the soul. However, the concept
of pre-eternity is not at all the same when it is applied to a creature of God on the one hand, and
when, on the other hand, it is applied to God in His Essence. The pre-eternity of God designates the
ontological sphere in which God exists in a manner totally independent from His creation, as if the
world had not "yet" come into existence. In one of his Tablets, Baha'u'llah defines the world of
"azal" as the world which has no beginning (azal al-la-badayat).293 This is thus Hahut. It is thus that we
read in "Hidden Words":
"Munajat," No. 28, p. 64; English: PM, No. 38, n.p. Shoghi Effendi has not

sought to render the distinction
between “azal” and “abad”. Both members of the phrase are summed up by
the expression “from eternity...”

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“Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity (azaliyya) of My essence, I knew
My love for thee.”294

Let us remark that even though the expression “pre-eternity which has no beginning” renders well
the meaning of “azal”, Baha’u’llah does not speak here of the
pre-existence of God, but of the pre-
existence of the contingent creatures (ka'inat). This indicates that
pre-eternity has different degrees,
and that the pre-eternity of contingent beings is distinguished from the
pre-eternity of the divine
Essence. In both cases, the epithet “which has no beginning” defines
precisely, and following the
usage of the Arabic language, the word “azal”. The Arab glosograph Tahanawi writes that “azal is
the persistent duration of duration in the past, even as abad is the persistent duration in the
future”295. This altogether corroborates what Baha’u’llah says in the
“Tablet of Varqa'“ which we
cited earlier296, in which after having spoken of “azal” “which has no beginning”, he speaks of
“abad” “which has no end”297. Hernandez, attempting to define these
terms, indicates that if “azal”
implies the negation of a first beginning, “azal” and “abad” coincide
in God. He adds “the two
eternities are but negative conceptions to which reflective thought has recourse in order to grasp
eternity in relation to time, but which does not correspond to the infinite reality of time in the two
senses; they are relative to the mode of thought fitted to the human spirit”.298 This remarks perfectly
fits the thought of Baha’u’llah. It is without doubt in order to remove the ambiguity which exists
between the pre-eternity of the divine Essence and the pre-eternity of the contingent creature that
Baha’u’llah sometimes had recourse to the term “dahr” which for him
most often signifies the same
thing as “azal”.

The word “abad” corresponds to the eternity of the creature. “Abad” supposes a beginning but no
end. It is the eternity of the soul. The soul has a temporal and individual

beginning with the
conception of the embryo, but its existence has no end. Its eternal and archetypal beginning is found
in its ontological cause which is situated in the spiritual worlds independently of its terrestrial
generation.

As for the meaning of the word “sarmad”, we should not pay too much attention to the definitions
which Baha’u’llah cites in “The Seven Valleys”. “Sarmad” from his pen, as besides from the pen of
‘Abdu’l-Baha299, is generally a strict synonym of “abad”. It thus designates the eternity of the
contingent world.

If we now refer to the metaphysical conceptions of Baha’u’llah, and in particular to his conception
of the three worlds —the World of the divine Essence, the World of Revelation and the World of
the creature— it would be logical to expect that there exist three principal archetypes of time which
would correspond to these three worlds. However, we find only a very few indications of such a

Arabic “Hidden Words,” Shoghi Effendi translation, #3.
R. Hernandez, article, “Qidam” in Encyclopedia of Islam.
“Munajat,” No. 36, p. 36; English: PM, No. 36, p. 46.
In Arabic: “Abad al-la-nihayya”.
R. Hernandez, op.cit.
For example, “Makatib,” volume I, pp. 444-456, where the two words appear several times in a perfectly
synonymous manner.

correspondence in the writings of Baha’u’llah, no doubt because the question would have appeared
futile to him. As we have seen, the archetypes of time do not relate to duration, but to ontological
causality. The World of Revelation must then have its own time, distinct from the eternity of the
divine Essence, and distinct from the eternity of the created spiritual realities. However, to discuss
the eternity of the divine Manifestations appears to be totally fruitless. We can at least speak of the
eternity of God taking the apophatic path, but this apophatic path is of no usefulness to us when
speaking of the divine Manifestations, because to speak of such a subject supposes that man is

capable of understanding the relations which link God with His Manifestations, and this is totally
impossible. We sometimes find the word “sarmad” associated with the World of Revelation, which
shows that its employment is far from being exclusive. It seems then that in the estimation of
Baha’u’llah, neither Persian nor Arabic was able to furnish an adequate term. We may note that
‘Abdu’l-Baha, in speaking of his father, employed the expression “Jamal-i-qidam” which is usually
translated as “Ancient Beauty”. The term “qidam” has a very precise metaphysical meaning,
designating the eternity of that which has not been engendered. Baha’u’llah is effectively described
as the One whom the Qur'an designates as “He Who is neither engendered nor engenders”300.
Even though the divine Essence is the ontological cause of the Manifestations and of the Holy Spirit
in general, to say nothing yet of the Most Great Spirit, nevertheless the ontological relationship
which links the World of Revelation to the divine Essence is not the same as the relationship which
links the World of creation to the divine Essence. It is this difference of relationship which underlines
the expression “Ancient Beauty”.

As ‘Abdu’l-Baha indicates in “Some Answered Questions”, from a human point of view, the World
of Revelation has neither beginning nor end.301 He points out that the divine Manifestations possess
three stations: the physical station, the human station which is also the station of the soul endowed
with reason, and the divine state of Manifestation. The state of Manifestation appears to the human
observer to be submitted to various terrestrial conditions, but actually that which is manifested in the
mirror of the Manifestation is the divine light which was not engendered, the illumination which
results from the total unity of the essence of the Manifestation with the divine Essence302.

Note that the three states of the divine Manifestation correspond respectively to Nasut, Malakut —
which are the two parts of the created world— and Jabarut which is identified with Revelation.

6. The Time of the Soul

Finally, the only kind of time which is truly important for the human being is

the time of Malakut,
the time of the eternity of the soul. To answer the question of how time is experienced in the
Kingdom of Abha can singularly enlighten us regarding the reality of the soul in the spiritual world.
Baha'u'llah affirms that after death, the soul conserves its
self-consciousness and also its
consciousness of the other souls which surround it.303 However, in the terrestrial world self-
consciousness is inseparable from the uninterrupted movement of thoughts, and this flux of thought

Discussed in 'Ali-Murad Davudi, "Uluhiyyat va Mazhariyyat," pp. 170-172.
Translator's Note: Qur'an 112:3.
"Some Answered Questions," XXXVIII, pp. 173-176.
'Ali-Murad Davudi, op.cit., p. 171.
Translator's Note: GL:LXXXVI.

governs the interior perception of time. It is inseparable from our sense of duration and this sense is
characterized always with the possibility of segmentation. If we affirm that the soul after death is a
spiritual reality outside of time this implies that the consciousness that this spiritual reality would
have of itself would be singularly different from our terrestrial consciousness because that
consciousness would no longer be characterized by a flux of thoughts fixed in duration and
segmentable in the midst of this duration. Yet, this is the form whereby most religions represent the
life after death. Do we say that the consciousness of the soul is situated outside of time and therefore
is congealed in its own eternity? Such a view is also incompatible with what Baha'u'llah tells us of
the life in the spiritual worlds. He tells us that the soul after death will adopt the form most suitable
to its state, which implies already a different state of consciousness, and that subsequently it will
experience an evolution throughout the different divine worlds which will result in it taking infinite
steps of becoming perfect, permitting it to reconcile itself ever increasingly with divine perfection.
This evolution implies thus a sort of kinetic movement interior to the soul the like of which it must
have some consciousness.

Finally, we can imagine that this movement of becoming perfect must be

discovered at the source of
the consciousness which the soul has of itself. How are we to conceive of a movement of becoming
perfect independently from time, as it is eternal, and from the feeling of duration? There is a
problem here which seems to be without response given the limitations of human understanding.
Nevertheless, this problem has the merit of attracting our attention to the fact that the Baha'i
writings are far from conceiving the life after death as a simple prolongation of our states of
terrestrial consciousness. Upon entering Malakut, not only does the soul lose its psyche (nafs), that is to
say the part of its consciousness which contains our psychological unconscious and the
characteristics of our terrestrial "me", but it also loses what we are habituated in this world to
consider as the determinant elements of our self-consciousness, that is to say the flux of thoughts
inscribed in duration. Hence we think of how frightful it would be to spend an eternity in the lonely
contemplation of ourselves in the mirror or our self-consciousness. For such an eternity to be, on the
contrary, unimaginable in blessedness, it is necessary that this consciousness shed the "me" to
become a pure identity and a pure individuality existing in communion with souls animated by the
same movement of progression along the degrees of their possible perfection. In this way we may
better comprehend why the shedding of ego is a primordial necessity in the totality of spiritual life.
The Baha'i Faith does not conceive of life after death as a simple prolongation of terrestrial life.
Rather, it is made up of a radical transformation of the soul in a world which, as Baha'u'llah
emphasized in the "Tablet of Haqqun-Nas" must be totally different from this world, notably in its
mode of existence. Here we are very far from the traditional representation of Paradise which the
Western world inherited from Swedenborg.304

7. The three metaphysical worlds

To comprehend the meaning of the nomenclature of the divine worlds in the "Tablet of All Food"
we have adopted a twofold course. On the one hand, we have collected from the writings of
Baha'u'llah all the indications that relate directly to this nomenclature,

and we have attempted to
reconstruct the image of each one of the divine worlds. On the other hand, we have conducted an
historical investigation to establish the origin and the evolution of this nomenclature with the aim of
McDannel, Collen and Lang, “Heaven: A History,” New Haven and London, 1988.

seeking to become apprised of the relation between this system in its mature phase and the manner
in which Baha’u’llah alludes to it in his writings. This has permitted us to recognize that the
significance of the nomenclature of the divine worlds in the writings of Baha’u’llah is not
metaphysical, but hermeneutical. He himself affirms this very clearly in the “Tablet of All Food”
when he declares that the significance of the expression “all food” must be sought in relation to each
of these worlds. This does not however mean that this nomenclature is deprived of all metaphysical
contents. But if we wish to know the metaphysical thought of Baha’u’llah, our purpose should not be
to seek it in this system.

There are other texts of Baha’u’llah, with extensive commentaries by ‘Abdu’l-Baha, which utilize a
completely different nomenclature. This nomenclature is not founded upon the four or five worlds
which we find in the “Tablet of All Food”, but upon three worlds that are much more clearly
delineated—the World of the unmanifested Essence, the World of Manifestation (also called the
World of Command), and the World of Creation.

It is difficult to reconcile this nomenclature of three worlds with that which we have earlier
described. It is better to consider them in a totally independent manner.

Nevertheless, we may note that the World of the unmanifested Essence corresponds clearly to Hahut,
even though it embraces certain aspects of Lahut. It is the “Absconditum”, the world of the Hidden
Treasure, the world of the injunction “Never wilt thou contemplate My countenance” and of “The
way is closed, seeking it is forbidden”305.

The World of the Manifestation is a world entirely distinctive to Baha’i metaphysics. It is this World
which gives Baha’i metaphysics its particular character and which, from many

points of view,
renders it totally incompatible with Islamic theology. The concept of
Manifestation plays the same
role in Baha'i thought as that of incarnation in Christian theology. The two
concepts are not
without relation. It is for this reason that the teaching of Baha'u'llah
often appears to be closer to
Christian than to Islamic theology.

The World of the Manifestation is the world of the divine Messenger, that is to
say, of the Prophet.
For Baha'u'llah, the Prophet is not a man like other men—it is a cosmic
principle. This is why,
following the example of the Bab, he entirely abandons the vocabulary of
Islamic prophetology and
does not speak of the "messenger" (rasul) or of the "prophet" (nabi)
when referring to the "divine
Manifestation" (mazhar-i-ilahi). There is an ambiguity in the English word
"manifestation" for this
word can have signify at the same time the active and the passive, while in
Arabic there are two
words that distinguish these two aspects of one condition: "zuhur" and
"mazhar". "Mazhar" to be
precise is not "Manifestation" but the "place of Manifestation", in
this case of God, for if God as
Essence is unknowable, then the only way for man to approach knowledge of Him,
is through the
knowledge of these "places of Manifestation", that is to say, His Prophets.

The "divine Manifestation" is described as similar to a pure mirror having
the capacity to perfectly
reflect the light of the divine sun. It is the incarnation of all the names,
attributes and qualities, of the
unknowable Essence of God; names, attributes and qualities which it emanates
upon all the world of
creation. It is thus through these "divine Educators", and only through
them, that man can have an
Celebrated utterance of Muhammad (hadith): "Al-sabilu masdudun wa al-talabu
mardudun."

idea of Divinity. They are the channel through which the Holy Spirit passes,
susceptible to enkindle
the "spirit of faith" in the human soul, which is the result of the
illumination of the soul when it is
endowed with the true and intimate knowledge of the Manifestation. We will
return more
expansively to this World of Manifestation in Chapter XIV.

After the World of Manifestation comes the World of Creation ('alam-i-khalq). This World is not only the physical world (Mulk), nor even the human world (Nasut), but also the world of souls (Malakut). It includes all of the spiritual worlds with their infinite diversity of creatures as well as the Imaginal World which serves as the interface between the worlds of spiritual realities (haqa'iq) and the physical world. There as well, we will return to all of these notions.

This metaphysical conception has as its consequence the suppression of every possibility of dualism and the considerable reduction of opposition between the sensible and the intelligible which so characterized Greek, and later Christian and Islamic, philosophy. We will return in the last part of this study to the philosophical consequences of this conception. What is important to underline, is that the World of Manifestation is not a simple “inter-world” as the Imaginal World was in the Illuminative Theosophy of the Ishraqis and Shaykhis. One must take account of the existence of this independent world in order to comprehend the mystical and philosophical vocabulary of Baha’u’llah, for it induces a profound semantic sliding.

8. The condition of servitude and of lordship

Traditional Islam contrasts the rank of the servitude of man to the absolute power of God to which man owes total submission. The word “'abd” signifies at the same time “servant” and “slave”, but beyond this, in its form “'ibad” meaning “worshipper”, it is the term par excellence depicting the human condition. To man is reserved the condition of servitude ('ubudiyya) and to God the condition of lordship (rububiyya). The title of “Lord” (rabb) is contrasted with that of “servant” ('abd). Shi'i theology has refined this terminology in distinguishing two conditions in God: the inaccessible Essence, the “Absconditum” also called “Invisible of the invisibles” (Ghayb al-ghuyub), which is the condition of the Deity (uluhiyya), and the condition of the manifestation of this essence, which corresponds to the deployment of His attributes in the condition of lordship (rububiyya). We find a very good example of this theology in the “Text of texts” of Haydar Amuli306, where these three

conditions are depicted as three “theophanies” (tajalli). Nevertheless, this theosophy is still very marked by the Platonism of Ibn Sina, which totally disappears in Baha’u’llah. For Haydar Amuli, the divine Essence constitutes the henadic unity (ahadiyya) which contains in itself all the spiritual realities (haqa'iq). For Baha’u’llah, this position is incompatible with the absolute affirmation of divine transcendence. The unknowable Essence contains nothing in itself but itself, excluding everything else, be it in the form of thoughts, images, traces or potentialities. The first emanation is engendered, but never was it contained in the Essence. Furthermore, this Essence being by definition unknowable, it can not be understood either in terms of theophany or in terms of emanation. For Haydar Amuli, on the contrary, the henadic unity constitutes the first theophany, from which emanates the second theophany which constitutes the “primordial determination” (ta'ayyun awwal). It is this second theophany which renders possible the passage of the one to the multiple. The contemplation by the divine Essence of its eternal attributes brings it to the condition of monadic

Haydar Amuli, “The Text of texts,” 1966, p. 451.

unity (wahidiyya) from which are derived the seminal reasons (a'yan thabita), which are the archetypes of all the potential essences. The third theophany is produced in the condition of lordship (rububiyya). Being manifests itself therein like light capable of engendering the multiplicity of the contingent creatures. It is the emanation of “the testimonial existence” (wujud shuhudi) which carries the revelation of the divine names and attributes of which the contingent creatures will become, in the condition of servitude ('ubudiyya), the “attestations” (shuhud).

In the metaphysic of Baha’u’llah, this language assumes a completely different character. Baha’u’llah situates the divine Essence beyond all conditions. One cannot even attribute to Him the condition of Deity, for this condition is an image which men have formed of their Creator, and like every image of the inaccessible Creator, it is unfailingly deficient and false. To the great scandal of

the Muslim “doctors”, Baha’u’llah does not hesitate to accord the condition of Deity (uluhiyya) and lordship (rububiyya) to the divine Manifestation, that is to say to the Prophet307.

In the “Book of Certitude” (Kitab-i-Iqan), Baha’u’llah explains that the three conditions of Deity, Lordship and Servitude belong to the divine Manifestations308. The condition of Lordship corresponds to the World of Command or the World of Revelation; and the condition of Servitude to the created World309. It is for this reason that Shoghi Effendi often translates “rububiyya” (Lordship) by expressions such as “Voice of Divinity” or “domain of Divinity”310. For the Baha’is, the affirmation of the divine unicity (tawhid) does not consist merely through affirming, like Muslims, that God is one, but resides in the affirmation that God and His Manifestation form but one and the same entity. Thus in the station of unicity (tawhid) and of differentiation (tajrid), the Deity and Lordship are identified in the henadic unity (ahadiyyat) and in the divine ipseidy (huvviyyat), that is to say in the unknowable Essence311. Otherwise put, the henadic unity (ahadiyyat) and the monadic unity (wahidiyyat) are identified with that Essence. To the henadic unity corresponds the condition of Deity, and to the monadic unity corresponds the condition of Lordship. But these two conditions are identified for the sake of man's comprehension. The Prophet is the Lord (rabb) of man, but he is also the Servant of God and his condition of Servitude is even greater and more perfect than the servitude of man312. It is because his condition of Servitude in relation to God is perfect that the divine Manifestation can claim the rank of Lord of man for the human condition of servitude is in comparison totally deficient.

Between the condition of unicity (tawhid)313 and the condition of differentiation (tafsil)314 on the one hand, and the metaphysical problem of the passage of the one (tafrid) to the multiple (tafsil) on the

“Kitab-i-Iqan,” p. 139; English: “Book of Certitude,” pp. 178-179.
“Kitab-i-Iqan,” pp. 136-140; English: “Book of Certitude,” pp. 175-180.
“Kitab-i-Iqan,” p. 140; English: “Book of Certitude,” p. 180.
For example, “Book of Certitude,” p. 181.

“Kitab-i-Iqan,” p. 137; English: “Book of Certitude,” p. 177. Shoghi Effendi translates here “rububiyyat” by “Godhead,” “uluhiyyat” by “Divinity”, “wahidiyyat” by “Singleness”, and “huvviyyat-i-batinih” by “Inmost Essence”.
“Kitab-i-Iqan,” p. 139; English: “Book of Certitude,” p. 179.
“Kitab-i-Iqan,” p. 136; English: “Book of Certitude,” p. 176.
“Kitab-i-Iqan,” p. 137; English: “Book of Certitude,” p. 178.

other hand, there exists a purely homological relation, and not a relation of causality. In the plan of creation, there exists but one Manifestation which is the universal Manifestation from which are engendered the individual Manifestations. The homological relation ends there.

Baha’u’llah here deconstructs the traditional frameworks of scholastic thought by separating two problems: that of the operation of the divine Verb, which he treats upon a theological level, and the purely ontological problem of the engenderment of Being. The divine Essence is at once beyond Being and beyond singularity (Ahad, tafrid). Of God, it is not even possible to say that He is one. To introduce singularity is to introduce limitation. Everything that man can think has a relationship only with the World of Revelation. Consequently, it is neither at the level of the divine Essence, nor at the level of the World of Revelation that one should pose the problem of the passage of the one to the multiple, but on the level of the created World. Baha’u’llah brings metaphysics back to earth, and in doing so, he makes renews the possibility of a dialogue between metaphysics and physics thereby making possible the existence of a comprehensive philosophy of Nature, the aim of which is to embrace and to link together the noetic, epistemological, heuristic, physical and metaphysical aspects of reality. This is a veritable philosophical revolution.

SECOND PART:
THEOSOPHY

CHAPTER SEVEN:
GNOSIS AND THE INTERIOR TRANSFORMATION OF MAN

The preceding chapters enabled us to see that the Baha’i conception of the divine worlds reveals a true metaphysical system, the major lines of which we have already described.

We have repeatedly alluded to the hermeneutical character of this hierarchy of worlds, without however applying ourselves to exploring the inner meaning thereof. This and the following chapters will aim to clarify the link which exists between metaphysics and hermeneutics on the one hand, and between theosophy and the philosophy of nature on the other hand. It will be our objective to demonstrate that the teaching of Baha'u'llah is presented before all else as a theosophy, that is to say a gnosis that aspires to bring about the total transformation of the individual, linked to an interpretation of the cosmos which establishes a tie between the universe and the revealed Word.

We will begin our exposition examining the tie between the universe and the revealed Word by studying the specific character of Baha'i gnosis, and subsequently the relations between Revelation and its hermeneutical interpretation.

1. Gnosis and Reality

The Western reader often has difficulty accepting that in order to understand the writings of Baha'u'llah, as in the case with those of most of the Oriental mystics, one must first abandon

most of one's reading habits and one's preconceptions about the relations between the contents and the form of a literary text. We are used to considering style as a secondary element of discourse, as a simple ornament. But manifest in the writings of Baha'u'llah we should not expect to find the Cartesian rules of discourse, nor the counsels of Boileau upon the clarity of style. The writings of Baha'u'llah refuse to fit into any conventional form. They are closer to poetry than to philosophical discourse, because they aim at communicating the ineffable. The conception which underlies them is based on the principle that it is not possible to separate the spiritual from the material, the intelligible from the sensible, the imagined from the empirical. Not one physical being can be reduced to its sensible dimension, for every object, be it the most prosaic, contains also a spiritual dimension. The world possesses therefore various levels of

reality. Beyond the empirical reality, there exists a spiritual reality, itself composed of various levels of reality, which altogether form not another world, but a higher reality (haqiqat) within the world of creation. The writings of Baha'u'llah aim at giving us access to this higher reality, and it is in this manner that they constitute a gnosis.

By gnosis in this instance, we must not suppose that this refers to a commonplace variety of esoteric knowledge, nor even to an initiated teaching which conventicles claim to dispense with more or less avowed purposes. Rather here the word "gnosis" should be comprehended in its strongest, most elevated and most noble sense: a knowledge which is acquired only through the gradual transformation of our inner being. The writings of Baha'u'llah are interspersed with warnings to the effect that no one will be able to understand his teaching without having first detached himself from the world and all that it contains, without having purified his eyes, his ears and his heart. There are entire Tablets which are consecrated to his methods for the acquisition of this state of spiritual judgment.

We will easily comprehend that the "gnostic" purpose of this teaching conditions its form. Also, if Baha'u'llah does not neglect to address the mind, he also speaks to the heart, to that spiritual "sense" that is a form of intuition linked to the experience which our soul has of the higher spiritual worlds and of their analogical and homological relations with the world below. For this purpose Baha'u'llah adopts a style which addresses itself directly to this intuition, by means of a language of symbols drawn from the common patrimony of the human collective unconscious, of which the world of dreams sometimes gives us a furtive glimpse. This aspect of his writings is without doubt the most perplexing for the Occident reader who habitually considers metaphors as primitive artifices, from which the rational discourse of modern man should divest itself, and who sees in the trees, the wind, the birds evoked by Baha'u'llah, the excesses of a superannuated Oriental style from which one must remove the husks in order to arrive at the

substantive pith of
true meaning. The danger of such an attitude would be to assume that when the writings of
Baha'u'llah speak of roses and nightingales they are merely charming allegories, and to imagine
that these are only the accessories of a style which addresses itself to simple souls, the symbolism
of which is easy to decipher. It is because of this that Baha'u'llah says that worldly knowledge is
the thickest of all veils which obscure our spiritual judgment, our capacity to recognize the truth.

Thus, for Baha'u'llah the words which Revelation utilizes are the vehicles of an infinite force
which has the capacity to transform both man and the world. This force can not be reduced to
the semantic content of mere words, even as he writes in His "Commentary on the Surah of
Wa'l-Shams:

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

"Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His
glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its
meaning can never be exhausted."315

We have thus been informed that the words of Baha'u'llah cannot be reduced to a single
meaning, even in their most literal and obvious sense. On the contrary, there is an abundance of
meanings. In fact, not only is there a personal meaning for each reader, but for every reader
there exist a multitude of significances each one of which is adapted to the spiritual state which
he is destined to traverse.

2. The Veiled Reality

Not only is the meaning of the words inexhaustible, but furthermore the words themselves
cannot imprison reality. This is one of the fundamental themes of Baha'i epistemology: the
universe is only partially accessible to reason. Not only is reason unable to reach the ultimate
reality of the cosmos, but there exists, beyond the cosmos, a spiritual universe which in its
greatest measure escapes reason altogether. Even this world is only partially intelligible.

Baha'u'llah writes, in the same Tablet cited above:

“How great the multitude of truths316 which the garment of words can never contain!
How vast the number of such verities as no expression can adequately describe, whose
significance can never be unfolded, and to which not even the remotest allusions can be
made!”317

Baha’u’llah however does not fall into the thesis of solipsism318. To affirm that rational language
cannot grasp the ultimate reality of the universe does not signify that reason is deprived of
meaning and of definiteness, but that the ultimate reality of the universe does partially escape the
grasp of human understanding. To attain to this extra-rational meaning requires a transcendence
of reason, a spiritual knowledge, thus, a gnosis.

Here we encounter the problem which is posed by every attempt to communicate a mystical
experience: how to explain in words what is, in its very essence, ineffable? What is particularly
interesting, is that Baha’u’llah extends this problem to the whole of reality. We will see this
question come up when we try to encompass the Baha’i notion of “Nature” for Baha’u’llah says
that Nature is a reality similar to the spirit of manxiv, and ‘Abdu’l-Baha defines Nature as an
“intelligible reality”, that is to say, a reality that is not sensiblexv. The essence of the sensible is not
sensible—hence the empirical perception of reality can only be partial. The apprehension of the
ultimate reality of the physical universe is of the same nature as the mystical experience of the

GL:LXXXIX:175. Translator’s Note: Surat ash-Shams is Qur’an chapter 91, which, after the
Bismillah, begins “w’ash-shams”.
Haqiqat; pl. haqa'iq; that is to say, “truth” but also “reality”.
GL:LXXXIX:176
318Translator’s Note: Solipsism represents the triumph of subjectivism, the perspective or theory that the

self is all that can be known to exist.

supernatural realms. It is a mystical experience in itself!

To consider these matters we will borrow the terminology of Bernard d'Espagnat, who defines the universe as a veiled reality which escapes all realistic interpretation. It is striking to see Baha'u'llah utilizing a vocabulary very close to this, taking up the image of the veil (hijab) which separates the observer of fundamental reality (haqiqat) from the creation situated outside of sensible experience. Empirical reality, which d'Espagnat also calls "weak reality", is but the manifestation of an infinitely greater reality. Thus, this greater reality, the "strong reality", a term which we might translate as "surreality", which Baha'u'llah calls haqiqat, is a non-physical reality about which we can have only an approximate comprehension, through an anagogical knowledge, be it by means of the natural intuition of man which perceives the nature of the real through his spiritual experience as a constitutive part of this universe, or through the complex noetic processes, such as the concepts constructed following the operation of mathematical algorithms, but of which the human spirit does not succeed in arriving at a concrete representation. In a certain fashion, these mathematical expressions do not function in a very different manner from anagogical spiritual knowledge319. Nevertheless, the perception of reality can not be reduced to a simple noetic process. Baha'u'llah informs us that spiritual asceticism does not suffice to obtain this gnosis (ma'rifat, 'irfan); one must also be endowed with divine election and special grace:

"Of these truths some can be disclosed only to the extent of the capacity of the repositories of the light of Our knowledge, and the recipients of Our hidden grace."320

This gnosis is not one, but multiple, for not only does it have the capacity to multiply itself as a function of all the spiritual states which the seeker traverses, but there exist various ways whereby the seeker undertakes this journey, such as the way of the heart, the way of the spirit and the illumination of the soul.

3. The conditions of the true seeker

In order that the reader might understand the nature of the three kinds of gnosis spoken of by Baha'u'llah, we must return to "the conditions of the true seeker" which constitute a recurrent theme throughout the writings of Baha'u'llah. These conditions, variable in their number and in their form, are a coherent whole which reflects an anthropological and psychological conception of man that is entirely original. These "conditions" had, in the eyes of Baha'u'llah, such an importance that he placed them in the opening paragraphs of his most important writings as a warning to the reader. One of the most clear expositions of the conditions of the true seeker is that found in the "Book of Certitude" (Kitab-i-Iqan):

"But, O my brother, when the true seeker [mujahid] determines to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries

Regarding the questions of weak reality and strong reality see Bernard d'Espagnat, "A la recherche du reel" (Paris, 3rd ed., 1991, pp. 132-168)

of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy321. He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments322. He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error323, or that hate repel him away from the truth."324

This text begins by defining the scope and nature of search. The "true seeker" is a mujahid, that is to say someone who has entered into jihad which is the effort (jahd) of man to arrive at the knowledge of God.

We clearly see three conditions described which are preliminary to this search:

-purification of one's heart
-sanctification of one's soul
-refinement of one's feelings

These three preconditions appear elsewhere with only a slight variation on the first page
introducing this same “Book of Certitude”, where Baha’u’llah cites them in this orderxvi:

-sanctification of one's soul
-turning one's ears away from human sayings
-turning one's heart from terrestrial attachments
-turning one's spirit from worldly preoccupations
-turning one's eyes from viewing perishable things

Innumerable Tablets begin with this kind of preliminary enumeration of preconditions. The
number of the preconditions is of little significance, for one can easily demonstrate that it is
possible in all cases to reduce them to three fundamental conditions.

In the three preconditions of the true seeker, we find the three organs which constitute the
psychology of Baha’u’llah: the heart (qalb; dil), the spirit (nafs) and the soul (ruh). Here we discover
a great imprecision of vocabulary that is not attributable to Baha’u’llah, but which derives
originally from the Hebrew Scriptures325. Muslim theologians always had difficulty distinguishing
between the soul and the spirit, so some employ the word nafs in the sense of the soul, while
others in the sense of the spirit, and the same is true of ruh. The terminology of Baha’u’llah also
fluctuates, and to such a degree that one must always rely upon the context in order to be sure of

The word “satanic” refers to the inferior nature of man, that is to say to his ego and to the heritage of
his animal nature in contradistinction to his divine self which is his spiritual nature.
The things of the sensible world are without reality in comparison with the surreality which constitutes
the spiritual world.
By “love”, we should understand here affection for sensible things and for created beings.
KI:#213:192; GL:CXXV:264
325Translator’s Notes: Denominated by Jews as the Tanakh – Torah, Neviim, Ketuvim; called the Old

Testament by Christians.

the meaning he intends by using the words nafs and ruh. The same unconsistency exists as much in French as in English because of the inherent difficulties of the Greek and Latin root languages in rendering the Hebraic terminology of the Bible. Ruh in the sense of the Holy Spirit is always translated into Latin by Spiritus, but it is not the same as ruh in the sense of the eternal principle which survives in man after death. Inasmuch as in French and English, this eternal reality is called “the soul”, we will hold to this principle and will translate ruh and nafs by “soul” each time these words designate that eternal reality. We will reserve the word “spirit” to designate the psychical reality of man, which we will soon attempt to define.

The vocabulary of Baha’u’llah is not limited though to these three words. The word “heart” can serve to translate the Arabic qalb and the Persian dil which Baha’u’llah sometimes used as synonyms, sometimes with differing definitions. The Arabic fu'ad is also used as a synonym for qalb and dil. Finally, we encounter the word sidr which literally means “chest” and which is susceptible of multiple meanings. The passage that we cited above from Kitab-i-Iqan is not a literal translation from the Persian but rather an interpretative translation. When we read the original text, we find three terms, qalb (heart in Arabic), sidr (chest) and dil (heart in Persian), which Shoghi Effendi rendered respectively by “heart”, “breast” and “soul”326. The only thing which we can divine from this terminology is that there seem to exist three elements in the psychology of Baha’u’llah which can assume multiple appearances. If we delve more deeply into the writings of Baha’u’llah, we find that underlying this fluctuating vocabulary is hidden a great consistency of doctrine. The heart (qalb) is, for Baha’u’llah, the seat of intuition. It is also a mirror which must be purified from the dust of the world in order to reflect the divine realities. The heart is “the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God”327, “the habitation of My beauty and glory”328. It is compared with Mt. Sinai329, that is to say with the place where the Prophet Moses received his

divine calling. It is through his heart that man can understand the essence of the Sacred Books,
and hence the heart is where the spiritual hermeneutic (ta'wil) is unfolded. It is, according to the
terminology of the Ishraqi philosophers, the organ of the creative imagination. The heart being a
mirror, it is constantly in need of being cleansed; without this daily maintenance, it risks being
covered over by the dust of daily life and thereby lose its reflective properties. The heart thus puts
man in contact with higher mysteries. Detachment is the process that results in the purification of
the heart. In effect, the heart is actually a cognitive organ, the seat of gnosis and this gnosis is not
the product of an accumulation of knowledge, but rather the fruit of the interior transformation
of man. And, the key of this transformation of the heart is detachment:

“No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true understanding except he be detached
from all that is in heaven and on earth.”330

We will note here that detachment concerns things both terrestrial and celestial. To act with the

We should remark here that “soul” and “spirit” do not correspond exactly to “ame” and “esprit” in
French, which does not facilitate the clarity of translations from one language to the other.
KI:#213:192; GL:CXXV:264
Persian Hidden Word, #27: “…the human heart…the habitation of My beauty and glory…”
Persian Hidden Word, #63: “The light hath shone on thee from the horizon of the sacred Mount and
the spirit of enlightenment hath breathed in the Sinai of thy heart.”
KI:#1:3

hope of being recompensed in the other world, is to show evidence of an attachment to celestial
things. To be detached means much more than renouncing the good things of this world. In the
“Tablet of the Foundations of the Sovereign Good”
(Lawh-i-Asl-i-Kullu'l-Khayr), also called the
“Words of Wisdom”, Baha’u’llah writes:

“The essence of detachment is for man to turn his face towards the courts of the Lord,
to enter His Presence, behold His Countenance, and stand as witness before

Him."331

The nafs is the vital principle of man. It is at the same time his psyche. The nafs is the envelope which contains the animal self, with all the instincts which we have inherited from our animal nature, and the ego which is in fact the fruit of an illusion. Reinterpreted in modern terms, the nafs is the organ of our psychical life. It contains all the elements of our personality, our unconscious, our subconscious and our neuroses. It is nafs, and not the soul, which can be affected by mental illness. The nafs is the organ of intellectual knowledge, and it is for this reason that Baha'u'llah often compares the nafs to the eyes that see and the ears that hear. Two things can impede our nafs from becoming conscious of the nature of the world. The first is its subjectivity, what we call its egocentricity, which propel each man to see the world in the manner which best suits him and which agrees with the opinion he has of himself; the second are prejudices and acquired knowledge. It is because of these two impediments that Baha'u'llah writes:

"The true seeker hunteth naught but the object of his quest…Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifice all things. That is, whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must he set at naught…"332

This is what Baha'u'llah means in saying that man must "cleanse" his nafs "from all that is earthly".333 He must first renounce himself, his sense of personal identity, in order to find his "divine self" which is the expression of the true spiritual nature of man, and he must subject his passions and his instincts to this superior and divine nature (lahuti or ilahi).

Ruh is something different from nafs. It is an essence (dhat) and "a spiritual reality" (haqiqat) the function and attributes of which we have already largely described. This ruh constitutes the authentic individuality of man and contains his true identity and personality, which have nothing to do with the psychological characteristics which are the attributes of the psyche (nafs). The true

function of the ruh is to know his Creator, and through this knowledge to receive His grace (fayd),
and to grow and develop thereby. In fact, the ruh is endowed with a special faculty which is
reason ('aql). It would be dangerous to confuse this “reason” with the rational faculty of Western
philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries. For Baha’u’llah, 'aql is that which distinguishes man
from the animal. It is thus spiritual, like the nature of man. Baha’u’llah writes, in the Tablet to
Hadi:

“…this rational faculty…should be regarded as a sign of the revelation of Him Who is the

TB:155
SV:7
KI:#2:3

sovereign Lord of all. Through its manifestation all these names and attributes have been
revealed, and by the suspension of its action they are all destroyed and perish.”334

“This same relationship bindeth this faculty with whatsoever hath been the recipient of
these names and attributes within the human temple. These diverse names and revealed
attributes have been generated through the agency of this sign of God.”335

Whereas the animal is the prisoner of Nature and its cognitive faculties do not permit it to
transcend the sensible world, 'aql permits man to access the intellectual and intelligible worlds,
that is, to understand the reality hidden in nature and to conceive of the spiritual realities. 'Aql is
thus the faculty which gives access to the spiritual world. Sometimes it is called the “creative
imagination”, given the relationship which exists between 'aql and the world of images ('alam-i-
mithal) and to distinguish it from the calculating reason defined by the philosophers of the
Enlightenment.

It is now important to define the link which exists between ruh and nafs, which we will henceforth
characterize respectively as the soul and the psyche.

The psyche is a transitory element which recapitulates various aspects of man.

It is comprised in part of what ‘Abdu’l-Baha calls “the animal spirit”, that is to say the vital principle which animates the physical body and which permits us to perceive the world through our senses. The animal spirit is mortal. ‘Abdu’l-Baha explains: “The animal spirit is the power of all the senses, which is realized from the composition and mingling of elements; when this composition decomposes, the power also perishes and becomes annihilated.”336 But the psyche is more than the animal spirit. It is composed of a large part of our psychological characteristics, which we habitually consider as determinating elements of our personality. Inasmuch as the soul cannot act directly in this world, the relations of the soul with the sensible world take place through the psyche. This psyche acts however not as a clear channel but as a distorting prism for it is dominated by the subjectivity of the ego. The more the psyche depends upon “terrestrial contingencies”337, the more our perception of the world is distorted. In order to see the world the way it is in reality we must strip the psyche of the subjectivity of the ego. It is this subjectivity of the ego which Baha’u’llah identifies with “the vain imaginations”338. For this reason, the essential work of the transformation of the inner being requires the stripping of the ego and the annihilation (fana) of the psyche. At the moment of death, the psyche disappears, thus at the same moment the subjectivity of the ego disappears. The soul can then become conscious of itself and of the world as they exist in their objective reality. Baha’u’llah says that the effect produced by the disappearance of the psyche is like the sudden tearing of a veil. As soon as the veil disappears, the soul can not take refuge in “the vain imaginations” and cannot have illusions about itself. It becomes conscious of its rank and of its spiritual accomplishment, along with the value of all the actions it committed in this world, so that Baha’u’llah writes:

GL:LXXXIII:164
GL:LXXXIII:165
SAQ:LV:243
Arabic: shu'unat-i'ardiyyih.

See, for example:
GL:6,12,34,42,82-83,93,156,196,203-204,219,291,307,324,326,337-338

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“It is clear and evident that all men shall, after their physical death, estimate the worth of their deeds, and realize all that their hands have wrought.”339

The psyche is thus a transitory phenomenon which is born of the interaction of the soul and the body. As soon as the tie between the soul and the body is broken, the illusion of the psyche disappears. The veil of the “vain imaginations” is torn, and the subjectivity of the ego vanishes.
Therefore, the purpose of the soul in this life is to bring about the purification of the psyche from the domination of illusion and temporality. A truly spiritual man is he who sees with the eyes of the soul and not through the eyes of the psyche. The divine intention is that the soul be illumined by the divine light and, like a mirror, to reflect this light in the heart of man so that his entire being will be illumined.

Regarding the soul and the heart, Baha’u’llah writes:

“Cleanse thy heart with the burnish of the spirit [ruh, that is to say the soul], and hasten to the court of the Most High.”340

“O son of being! Thy heart is My home; sanctify it for My descent. Thy spirit (ruh) is My place of revelation; cleanse it for My manifestation.”341

“O son of man! The light hath shone on thee from the horizon of the sacred Mount and the spirit (ruh) of enlightenment hath breathed in the Sinai of thy heart. Wherefore, free thyself from the veils of idle fancies and enter into My court, that thou mayest be fit for everlasting life and worthy to meet Me. Thus may death not come upon thee, neither weariness nor trouble.”342

We see in these passages that the heart as much as the psyche (nafs) are subjected to the soul, which demonstrates the interdependency of the three conditions of the true seeker: purify his heart, release his psyche (nafs) and sanctify his soul (ruh). The soul being an essence, it is already

perfectly pure and can not be sullied, for terrestrial things have no effect upon it. It must nevertheless receive the illumination of the divine light in order that it may become the mirror of the Countenance of God, and so that the spiritual potentialities which form “the divine deposit” in it may be activated. This illumination of the divine light constitutes what ‘Abdu’l-Baha calls “the spirit of faith” (ruh-i-imani) or “the celestial spirit” (rúh-i-ásimaní), which comes from the breaths of the Holy Spirit and, which, through the divine power, is the cause of eternal life. It is this power which makes “the earthly man heavenly, and the imperfect man perfect. It makes the impure to be pure, the silent eloquent; it purifies and sanctifies those made captive by carnal

GL:LXXXVI:171
Persian Hidden Words. #8; Majmu'ih, p. 385. The word ruh can have here a double meaning. It can designate the soul, but also the Holy Spirit. However, in either case, the soul is the mirror of the Holy Spirit. We are here in the presence of an illuminative metaphysic.
Arabic Hidden Words, #39
Arabic Hidden Words, #63

desires; it makes the ignorant wise.”343

4. The three kinds of gnosis

In the writings of Baha’u’llah there is a close relationship established between psychology, epistemology and the prerequisites of the true seeker. Baha’u’llah uses four terms in reference to spiritual knowledge: 'ilm, ma'rifat, 'irfán and hikmat. The richness of this vocabulary implies a specialized meaning for each of these words and conceals a complete gnoseology. Among the four enumerated terms, 'ilm is a generic word in Arabic which designates all forms of science and of knowing. In the writings of Baha’u’llah, this word designates either the knowledge of God in a general sense, or it may substitute for any and all of the remaining three terms of the gnoseology.
It is for this reason that we find expressions such as “'ilm va ma'rifat”, “'ilm va 'irfan”, “'ilm va hikmat” in which, each time, the word 'ilm serves to recall the other terms

in the series. Shoghi Effendi has most often translated ma'rifat with “divine knowledge” or “true knowledge” and 'irfan with “true understanding.”344 These are arbitrary expressions which are used because of the lack of a precise equivalent in the Western languages which would be capable of transmitting the subtleties of the gnoseology of Baha’u’llah. Ma'rifat is susceptible of receiving multiple meanings in Arabic and Persian. The term serves to describe more often the object than the process of intellection. However, Baha’u’llah gives it a particular meaning which is rarely grasped prior to long acquaintance with his writings.

As for 'irfan, it is a technical term of the Sufis, adapted from Arabic to Persian, which perfectly designates gnosis, the esoteric knowledge which is acquired through the transformation of the inner being and the intuitive and direct awareness of the hidden meaning of words. 'Irfan is a noetic process which permits one to apprehend “allusions” (ishárát) and penetrate mysteries (ásrár) in order to arrive at the spiritual meaning (ma'ání) of the revealed Word through the deciphering of its analogical symbols. 'Irfan is thus the perfect instrument for hermeneutics. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Baha’u’llah considerably enlarges the meaning and the technique of 'irfan. Hikmat is generally rendered as “wisdom”, for it is the special attribute of the sage (hakim) and thus the aim of all gnoseology. There is no real wisdom without “true knowledge” (ma'rifat) and without “true understanding” ('irfan).

The vocabulary of the gnoseology of Baha’u’llah presents the same difficulties as that of his psychology. The terminology which he has inherited is the fruit of long evolution and the vehicle of ancient tradition. One cannot understand it by referring to dictionaries and encyclopedias. One must penetrate the interior meaning of the texts. And, Baha’u’llah, once more refuses to take a dogmatic stance. It is thus, probably by intention, that he does not permit complex truths to be circumscribed in a reductionist phraseology. Thus, when we seek to determine the meaning of the vocabulary of his gnoseology, we must at every step examine our results

and accept that
one term may have multiple definitions which can only be clarified for us by the specific contexts
in which they are found. In the study of texts, it is evident that
Baha'u'llah refers not only to
various levels of knowledge, but especially to several types thereof. It is these types of knowledge
which one must directly grasp notwithstanding the fluctuations in the usages of vocabulary. As

SAQ:XXXVI:165
KI:3,100.

always, it is the law of context which must be imposed. This is without doubt one of the points
upon which Oriental logic contrasts most markedly with Western logic, and it is thus an
important source of misunderstandings.

Several passages of the "Book of Certitude" (Kitab-i-Iqan) seem to suggest a close tie between the
different types of gnosis and psychology. At the end of the passage concerning the prerequisites of
the true seeker, Baha'u'llah writes:

"Only when the lamp of search (talab), of earnest striving (majahidih), of longing desire
(dhuq), of passionate devotion (shuq), of fervid love ('ishq), of rapture, and ecstasy (valih,
judhb, hubb),345 is kindled in the seeker's heart (qalb), and the breeze of His loving-kindness
is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and
misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge ('ilm) and certitude (yaqin) envelop his
being. At that hour will the mystic Herald (bashir-i-manavi), bearing the joyful tidings of the
Spirit, shine forth from the City of God resplendent as the morn, and, through the
trumpet-blast of knowledge (ma'rifat), will awaken the heart (qalb), the soul (nafs), and the
spirit (ruh) from the slumber of negligence. Then will the manifold favours and outpouring
grace of the holy and everlasting Spirit (ruh-i-samadani) confer such new life upon the
seeker that he will find himself endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart (qalb),

and a new mind (fu'ad).”346

This text clearly indicates that the purpose of the knowledge ('ilm) of God, the summation of all
forms of gnosis, is to awaken the heart (qalb), the psyche (nafs) and the soul (ruh) to a new life.347 It
is thus clearly established that these three elements of human psychological composition are not
only the components of the personality of man, but also constitute distinct organs of cognition.
We would thus be tempted, basing ourselves upon study of the texts, to establish a relatively close
link between the three psychological components of man and the three types of gnosis — true
knowledge (ma'rifat), true understanding ('irfan) and wisdom (hikmat). Of course, as the
psychological and gnoseological vocabulary of Baha’u’llah fluctuates, this association is suggested
more clearly by an analysis of the contents of these texts than by a purely semantic study of the
terms employed. With all of these preconditions, it seems that we can affirm the existence of
three kinds of knowledge—a knowledge of the psyche, a knowledge of the heart and a knowledge
of the soul.

The first degree of gnosis, which Baha’u’llah often denotes with the term ma’rifat, is associated
with the purification and transformation of the psyche (nafs). It is this kind of knowledge which
one discovers by entering the “Valley of Search”348, that is to say through renouncing all that one
We have enumerated here some of the most important mystical states (hal) which the seeker is destined
to traverse before attaining to the station (maqam) of the “seventh valley”
of “absolute nothingness” (fana).
This phrase merits a long commentary, not possible in this context, in order to more precisely describe
these states.
KI:#216:195-196; Cairo edition in Persian, p. 151. Fu'ad is another Arabic word for “heart”. Shoghi
Effendi translates it by “mind” while we have rendered it in French as “consciousness.”
The translation of these terms is unfortunately very ambiguous. It is only through reference to the
Arabic terms that we can protect ourselves from misunderstandings.
SV:5

has learned in accordance with the formula which Baha'u'llah often repeats—"The most grievous of all veils is the veil of knowledge."349 This knowledge, which is a veil, is what Baha'u'llah calls "the exoteric sciences" ('ulum-i-zahirih) and has no connection with the station attained by true knowledge (ma'rifat).350 The veils which interpose themselves between consciousness and true knowledge are of two kinds: those which come from acquired knowledge and those which come from the passions (hawa), that is to say from the animal nature of man and his ego. Thus, Baha'u'llah explains that knowledge ('ilm) is of two kinds: divine and satanic.
Divine knowledge is received as an inspiration (ilhamat) coming directly from the spiritual realms and is proportionate to the degree to which man makes himself ready to receive. Satanic knowledge is derived from the suggestions of the ego, and results in one taking as real what is nothing but the product of man's perverted imagination (takhayulat) under the influence of the "obscure self" (nafs-i-zalimani). These are the lowest aspects of the psyche, deriving directly from our animal heritage, and it whispers egotistical desires in our ears and inspires terrestrial passions in us.351

To recapitulate, on the one hand, Baha'u'llah tells us, we have satanic knowledge. Its source resides in the suggestions of the egoistical desires, its principle operates like a veil between the creature and his Creator; its result is arrogance (kibr), pride (ghurúr), and presumption (nakhvat) which constitute a deadly poison resulting in destroying the life of the soul. On the other hand, we have divine knowledge, the source of which is God Himself, and the principle of which is "fear God and God will teach you." This fear of God is above all a reverential fear. It proceeds from the recognition of the subordination of the creature to his Creator, and is indispensable that man may receive divine inspirations (ilhámát). Its result is manifested in man through the quality of patience so characteristic of the "Valley of Search", and the ardent desire (shúq) which

conducts man to the second degree of gnosis, true comprehension (irfán) and love (mahabat).352

The suggestions of the animal part of man are not the only obstacles between his consciousness
and the apprehension of true knowledge. Prejudices and thoughtless attachment to the opinion of
others [taqlid] also constitute veils which are difficult to tear through. Baha'u'llah affirms that in
order to attain true knowledge, one must forget what one has learned and renounce all
attachment to the heritage of one's forebears.353 Likewise, other certitudes—ideological,
theological or even of clan and nation—constitute pseudo-identities which impede man from
arriving at the knowledge of the new Manifestation354, which is the source of all knowledge.

True knowledge [mar'ifat] naturally leads to the second degree of gnosis which is "true
comprehension" ('irfán). While true knowledge depends upon an effort of will and rationality, true

KI:#206:188
KI:#206:188; #237:214
See KI:#76:69-70. This passage has remarkable similarities to the doctrine of Carl Jung. The "dark
self" of Bahá'u'lláh corresponds to what Jung calls "the shadow".
The expression nafs-i-zalimani is
contrasted with the expression nafs-i-rahmani (divine self) about which we will speak.
Ibid. We give here a commentary in the form of a paraphrase which combines this passage from the
"Book of Certitude" with others from the same book and from the "Seven Valleys".
SV:5
See KI:#16:16-17; #111:105-106.

comprehension is a process which is even more intuitive and concerns the quintessential organ of
intuition, this is to say, the heart, which must be purified through detachment from terrestrial
things. It must be delivered from the prison of the psyche (nafs) and from the passions (hava).355
The heart is like a mirror. Even when it is turned towards the spiritual kingdom (Malakút), there is
still a danger that the dust of the terrestrial world will collect upon it and

enfeeble its power. This
is why the heart must be purified daily.

When the heart is delivered from all attachment (ta'aluqát), it becomes the site of understanding
(idrák) and of inspiration (ilhámát), having contact with the invisible world (ghayb). Through a
process of inspiration and illumination, into the heart are deposited the secrets (asrár) of the divine
sciences ('úlum-i-rabbání).356

The purification of the heart from the dust of malice (ghard) makes man capable of
comprehending the meaning of the symbolic terms revealed by the divine Verb in every
Dispensation.357 Here we recognize the traditional and technical sense of 'irfán in the Persian
mystical tradition, but considerably enlarged. The difference relies essentially upon the fact that
the Sufis and mystics in general think that the acquisition of intuitive knowledge depends upon
their asceticism and their self-abnegation, while for Baha'u'llah intuitive knowledge is a grace
which is bestowed upon man according to the good-pleasure of God, totally dependent upon
influence of the divine Manifestations, Who are like the suns of science ('ilm) and of true
comprehension.358 This true comprehension is manifested in the heart as an illumination (tajallí)
which causes man to become the locus of the manifestation (zuhúrát) of the graces (fuyúdát)
emanating from the infinite invisible world (ghayb-i-muntanahí).359 This true comprehension works
like a fire, which, the fire of the burning bush, destroying the veils which obscure spiritual
vision.360 Thereby the divine mysteries (asrár) and spiritual knowledge ('ilm) appear to the seeker
divested of all veils.361

Man cannot arrive at this intuitive knowledge, without having already acquired true knowledge,
that is to say the purification of his understanding. The eye and the heart work together. The one
and the other are both sensitive to the seductions of the terrestrial world. Once the suggestions
(ishárát) of the material world are rejected, man attains true comprehension ('irfán). This true
comprehension is equivalent to the knowledge of the truth (haqq), which

requires no proof nor
testimony362, the truth of divine revelation, the ultimate reality of the
universe and finally, God
(al-Haqq). The seeker thus traverses the different degrees of true
comprehension (‘irfán) until he
ascends to the “heaven of the spirit” (rúh) in which he sees nothing but
God in all things, and
knows all things only through the knowledge of God and of His Manifestations.
Here we touch

KI:#56:52
KI:#77:70
KI:#66:62
KI:#2:3
KI:#2:3
KI:#57:53
KI:#56:52
KI:#100:91

upon an important point in Baha’i epistemology. Science communicates from the
sensible world
to the intelligible world, gnosis communicates from the spiritual world to the
terrestrial realm,
and theosophy brings about the synthesis of these two processes. True
comprehension
participates in this dual process. It represents the knowledge which descends
from the invisible
world, but it is not exclusively permit comprehension of the secrets of táwíl
or of spiritual realities,
but rather it embraces all terrestrial realities as well. ‘Irfán makes
accessible the knowledge of the
reality of things, not as independent entities, but as traces (áthár) of the
Kingdom of Names, as
mirrors of the attributes of God, as realities dependent upon the divine
reality of which they are
emanations. The knowledge of God is indispensable to arrive at comprehension of
the ultimate
reality of creation, while to know God, we have need of nothing other than Him.

The third degree of gnosis is constituted by wisdom (hikmat). Wisdom is the
knowledge of the soul.
It is manifested in the soul when the seat of the soul is “sanctified”
(taqdís). This “sanctification”
describes the process by which the soul acquires divine qualities, and it is
the objective of the
entire process of the spiritual life. It does not merely require detachment,
but also the

manifestation of positive qualities such as justice, compassion and especially love of the other.
The sanctified soul is the soul which manifests in this world the divine attributes which would otherwise exist in it only in a state of potentiality. Wisdom is the highest manifestation of the spiritual nature of man.

The word “wisdom” designates two things in the Baha’i writings—on the one hand it is the manifestation of divine qualities—wisdom thus becomes knowledge in action; and on the other hand, it represents clear understanding of the mysteries (asrár) of God. While true comprehension (‘irfan) is still a human level of knowledge, the sage participates in the knowledge of God.

In the first sense, of wisdom in action, ‘Abdu’l-Baha is the perfect exemplar. Each and every one of his actions was the manifestation of his perfect nature and of an absolute spirituality. All trace of the ego having been effaced, ‘Abdu’l-Baha attained and adhered to the knowledge of Baha’u’llah. His actions were the expression of the totality of his knowledge, and hence, they manifested wisdom. This wisdom is thus not a literary knowledge or a science of words, but a grammar of action—the science of just action at the just moment, the incarnation of absolute love.

Baha’u’llah alludes to another meaning of the word which is in fact closely dependent upon the first. He speaks of the “mysteries of knowledge (‘ilm) and wisdom (hikmat)”363 and the “secrets of divine wisdom” (asrár-i-hikmat-i-rabbání).364 He furthermore suggests that these “secrets” and these “mysteries” are nothing other than the comprehension of the nature of the divine names. This directs us to his speculative theology, which presents the creation as the reflection of the names and attributes of the divine Essence. Thus, we find it written that whosoever meditates upon the manifestation of the divine Names in the realities of all created things, will see open before him the doors of wisdom (hikmat) and the portals of divine knowledge (‘ilm). There is thus a close link between wisdom and the knowledge of the spiritual worlds. When man attains to

the horizon of
divine science (‘ilm-i-rabbání), he obtains this divine vision
(basírat-i-iláhíyyih) which, through the

KI:#26:28
KI:#106:100

intermediation of the perfect and eternal Verb
(kalámat-i-támiy-i-samadáníyyih), makes him capable
of comprehending the mysteries (asrár)365 of spiritual wisdom
(hikmat-i-rúhíyyih) and to contemplate
them without veils, behind the tabernacle of absolute grace (fadl wa
afdál).366 Wisdom culminates
this power of spiritual vision which puts us into contact with the divine Verb, guardian of the
secrets of revelation and, permits us thereby to contemplate things hidden from the eyes of
mortals men. Elsewhere, Baha’u’llah declares that science (‘ilm) and
wisdom (hikmat) act like fire
and that they are accessible only to those who possess spiritual vision
(basírat) and divine nature
(fitrat).367 And he adds that wisdom does not appear except in the stainless heart.368 Finally,
wisdom is nothing other than the apprehension of revelation, not of the revealed Word but of
Revelation as cosmic law.

5. Gnosis as the knowledge of the divine Manifestations

Even before the acquisition of divine virtues such as honesty and love, there is an even more
fundamental condition which the seeker must fulfill in order to obtain divine knowledge—he
must first recognize the Manifestation of God for the age in which he lives.

This recognition of the Manifestation constitutes the first degree of gnosis, that is to say, the
object of “true knowledge” (ma'rifat). It is only through the attainment to this first degree that one
may arrive at a “new life” and acquire a “new spirit” (ruh)369, for the Prophets are the essences of
knowledge ('ilm) and comprehension ('aql)370. As explained above, 'aql is that intellectual power of
man which enables him to conceptualize divine mysteries and grasp intelligible realities. It is not
calculating, mechanical rationality, as is too often believed. This spiritual reason is at the same
time an imaginative faculty, capable of deciphering the symbols, an intuitive

faculty, capable of
receiving impressions from the spiritual worlds, and a rational faculty, capable of correlating
these two powers of the soul and rendering their perceptions into terms which can be
comprehended by others. The true knowledge arrived at by this faculty through its recognition of
the Manifestation forms the veritable science of the divine unity (tawhid) and constitutes the
fundamental and supreme aim of creation371. This knowledge of the Manifestation, that is to say,
of the Prophet, is equivalent to the knowledge of God, for God is in Himself unknowable,
knowable only through His Manifestations. The only thing that we can know of Him, are His
names and attributes, of which the divine Manifestations constitute the most perfect mirror.
Their Countenance is nothing other than the divine knowledge372. The divine Manifestations are

KI:#26:28
KI:#16:16
KI:#27:28
KI:#211:191
KI:#127:120
KI:#158:149. Shoghi Effendi has here translated "'aql" by "understanding" whereas usually the word is
taken to connote "reason". This is the spiritual intelligence that is also called the active imagination and
which permits us to comprehend spiritual realities. We will speak further of this active imagination in
relation to the imaginal world.
KI:#27:28
KI:#151:142

themselves manifestations of the world of the "invisible" (ghayb). They are the "essences of
knowing" (jawhar-I-'ilm) and the "symbols of wisdom" (lata'if-I-hikmat).373 They constitute the
heaven of knowing and knowledge of which they are also the emanation. They are the cause of
the faith of "the tree of unity" (tawhid) which manifests the "fruits of its absolute singularity"
(tafrid), "the leaves of detachment" (tajrid), "the flowers of divine knowledge" ('ilm) and of
"certitude" (iqan), "the breezes of wisdom" (hikmat) and of

“elucidation” (bayan).374

The knowledge of the divine Manifestations is one and undivided, even as the knowledge of God is one and unique. It is the expression of all the divine names and attributes. It is thus much more than a knowing. In order to descend to the level of humanity, this knowledge appropriates the vehicle of Revelation which incarnates itself in human language. It is for this reason that Baha’u’llah describes the Manifestation as a sun shining above knowledge ('ilm) and spiritual sense (ma'ani).375 The Prophets are the depositories of this spiritual sense. They are the only ones who know the true hermeneutic (ta'wil). True comprehension ('irfan) is that which permits man to enter into contact with the spiritual sense, but he can not do this without the guidance and spiritual intermediation of the Manifestation. This knowledge of the Manifestation is the only means which can confer upon the soul (ruh) a new life376, and this new life is the spirit of faith.
This spirit of faith constitutes the purpose of the creation of man. In this sense, the spirit of faith is identical to knowing the divine.377

6. The unity of the spiritual knowing

There is a danger in attempting to present the three kinds of gnosis that we have identified independently of each other. The process of the spiritual awakening of man is unique, and these three divine gnoses form a unity, even if divers pathways lead to this unity. Baha’u’llah writes:

“Therefore, O brother! kindle with the oil of wisdom (hikmat) the lamp of the spirit (ruh) within the innermost chamber of thy heart (fu'ad), and guard it with the globe of understanding ('aql), that the breath of the infidel may extinguish not its flame nor dim its brightness. Thus have We illuminated the heavens of utterance (bayan) with the splendours of the Sun of divine wisdom (hikmat) and understanding ('irfan), that thy heart (qalb) may find peace, that thou mayest be of those who, on the wings of certitude (iqan),

KI:#45:44
KI:#30:33-34. The sequence of Persian terms which we find here do not form an

accidental series, but
constitute different characteristic techniques of Bahá'í spirituality.
Unfortunately, English cannot render
the great richness of this vocabulary. Tajrid for example indicates the
privation of the self which is
reduced to its pure spiritual nature.
375Translator's Note: KI:#26:28: "…they surely would have been guided to
the light of the Sun of Truth,

and would have discovered the mysteries of divine knowledge and wisdom."
KI:#151:142: "The
knowledge of Him, Who is the Origin of all things, and attainment unto Him, are
impossible save
through knowledge of, and attainment unto, these luminous Beings who proceed
from the Sun of
Truth."
KI:#124:118
KI:#26:28

have soared unto the heaven of the love of their Lord, the All-Merciful."378
This citation recapitulates all that we have said regarding Baha'i psychology
and Baha'i gnosis.
At the same time, it shows the unity of this spiritual knowledge.

In another text, Baha'u'llah writes that it is by the grace of the "waves
of mercy" (ghamam-i-
rahmat), that is to say that by virtue of a particular grace, that the heart
may become a fertile soil
for the growth of divine knowledge (ma'rifat) and wisdom (hikmat).379 This
mercy, he says, descends
from the "heaven of Revelation" by grace "of the breezes of generosity"
and the "breaths of
unity". The unity which is here referred to is the knowledge of the tawhid,
that is to say, for
Baha'u'llah, the comprehension of the nature of the divine Manifestation.
It is through the power
of this grace that divine knowledge and wisdom expand their illumination within
the heart.380
This grace has the capacity to transform the most ignorant of men, as the
example of the
Prophets of the past shows us—their disciples were, for the most part, simple
people and without
formal education. It is these simple and uneducated people who were able to
recognize the new
Manifestation while the priests and other educated people were unable to do so,
blinded by their
worldly knowledge. It is these same simple people who have grasped better than

their educated
counterparts, the meaning and implications of the prophetic message and who have transmitted
it to the wider society. Baha'u'llah says that the simple people were moulded in "the clay of the
eternal knowledge" ('ilm-i-laduni)381, and that true knowledge is "a light which God sheddeth into
the heart of whomsoever He willeth"382 In order to acquire mystical knowing, one must first take
leave of the knowledge which is abroad amongst men, which is transmitted and exchanged.
Mystical knowing is not bartered, nor is it traded, for it is incommensurable. It is a pure
experience which proceeds from a pure illumination (tajalli) coming from the "heaven of the
divine knowledge" ('ilm) and from the "spiritual sense" (ma'ani). It is by this means alone that the
"mysteries of the divine wisdom" (asrar-i-hikmat-i-laduni) can be communicated to man.

7. Certitude

The purpose of spiritual knowing and its result is certitude.383 Having arrived at true knowledge,
one realizes that the life of the body is not the true life; that the true life is that of the heart (hayat-
i-qalb), which belongs only to those who have a pure and radiant heart, the result of faith (iman)
and certitude (iqan).384 This life of the heart is immortal. This faith and this certitude are the sum

KI:#65:61
KI:#48:46
KI:#48:46
The expression laduni is unfortunately untranslatable, as it contains a Qur'anic allusion. Ladun literally
means "close to," "in the presence of." In the Qur'an the word refers to the divine presence symbolized
by the "Throne". Laduni thus means "close to God", "attained the presence of God". A laduni knowledge
is knowledge given directly by God through the means of mystical intuition.
Famous Islamic tradition (hadith); cited in KI:#48:46; #202:184
Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the "knowledge of certitude" as a condition of the true seeker
Translator's Note: KI:#128:120: "Wert thou to attain to but a dewdrop of the crystal waters of divine
knowledge, thou wouldst readily realize that true life is not the life of the flesh but the life of the spirit.

For the life of the flesh is common to both men and animals, whereas the life of the spirit is possessed

total and the recapitulation of all divine knowing. However, the quality of this certitude in the individual heart depends upon the spiritual condition of the believer. In order to describe the various spiritual states, Baha'u'llah uses an old Sufi tradition which distinguishes three ascending levels of certitude — the certitude of one who has known ('ilmu'l-yaqin), the certitude of one who has seen ('aynu'l-yaqin) and the certitude of one who has experienced (haqqu'l-yaqin).385 The passage from the certitude of one who has seen to the certitude of one who has experienced is the most delicate and perilous transition. Many have known and many have seen but have refused to go further for fear that they would not be able to handle the sacrifices and renunciations this would require of them. Baha'u'llah describes the passage to haqqu'l-yaqin as the true "sirat", that is to say the bridge which crosses over hell. This sirat is as narrow as the blade of a spear, and it permits the righteous who tread the "straight and narrow" to access paradise whereas it conducts the impious who tread the "convoluted and broad" into the flames of hell. The state of haqqaqu'l-yaqin requires the disappearance of every trace of self-consciousness and a total privation of the psyche. In this state, all traces of self-consciousness represent a danger for the spiritual survival of the soul. Baha'u'llah also speaks, in another context, of another threesome—the certitude of the one who has seen, the certitude of the one who has experienced and the certitude of the light (nuru'l-yaqin).386 This certitude of the light corresponds to the state of the believer once he will have become a pure mirror reflecting the divine names and attributes. Baha'u'llah says that the believer who has attained this state benefits from a special gnosis whereby the atoms of all things become guides which conduct him to the object of his quest, and wherein truth becomes as easy for him to discern from error as it is for most people to distinguish day from night.

CHAPTER EIGHT:
HERMENEUTIC AND THEOSOPHY OF THE DIVINE WORLDS

1. Symbols and analogical language

After having established that the ultimate reality of the universe can not be directly apprehended by the intellect, we more easily understand why language must assume a different course in its attempt to communicate our experience of this reality. This explains why the language of Baha'u'llah is essentially symbolic. However, we must not be mistaken as to the meaning of the symbols and metaphors he employs, and we would be wrong to perceive them as purely allegorical.

only by the pure in heart who have quaffed from the ocean of faith and partaken of the fruit of certitude."
KI:#127:120. Translator's Note: The passage cited by the author does not seem to refer to the three stages, either in the Persian or in the English translation. Al-Suhrawardi seems to have authored a work on the three stages of certitude. It is cited by Idries Shah, "The Sufis", p. 273: "The knowledge of certitude, in which it is known, verified and evident; the Essence of Certitude, manifest and witnessed; the Truth (Reality) of Certitude, in which there is a conjoining of the witnesser and the witnessed."
Translator's Note: We have been unable to locate this passage, as of October 2015.

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In the analogical language of Baha'u'llah, the symbol acquires its own ontological existence as an intermediate stage between the spiritual reality that is sought after and our conceptual intelligence. It is not a literary technique, for, in literature, the symbolic expression always leads us to a conceptual reality, whether it is sensible or intelligible, for which a representation already exists. This is not the case when Baha'u'llah uses expressions such as "the Tongue of Grandeur" or "the Supreme Pen". In the famous "Tablet of the Celestial Huri" (Lawh-i-Huriyyih) Baha'u'llah describes his "summoning" to a prophetic mission in the prison called Siyah-Chal by the Holy

Spirit in the form of a celestial maiden (huri). Subsequently, ‘Abdu’l-Baha explained that this huri was a purely metaphorical expression of his father's experience. The purpose of the metaphor in this case was to describe a reality in a purely intelligible manner because the representation of this reality is impossible for the human spirit. In this case, and many others, the symbolic form does not correspond to any sensible reality.

To each expression corresponds a multitude of symbolic levels and only a personal enquiry can travers these degrees. The “book” thus reveals a multitude of significances and man never finishes discovering their meanings.

2. Man-macrocosm and the anthropic spirit

Baha’u’llah begins by affirming that knowledge of this world depends upon the consciousness of man. He affirms:

“The All-Merciful hath conferred upon man the faculty of vision, and endowed him with the power of hearing. Some have described him as the “lesser world,” when, in reality, he should be regarded as the “greater world.” The potentialities inherent in the station of man, the full measure of his destiny on earth, the innate excellence of his reality, must all be manifested in this promised Day of God.”387

By insisting that man is the macrocosm and the universe is the microcosm, Baha’u’llah reverses the perspective of all the gnostics, hermetics and theosophists who have succeeded one another since antiquity. But what is he really saying?

We can understand this affirmation in various ways that are doubt complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The first meaning of the concept of “man-macrocosm”, is that the universe was created with the appearance of man as its purpose. The man-macrocosm is thus the application of a teleological principle, and an anthropic principle. Teleological principle is an essential element, even an indispensable one, of all theosophy. It affirms that the evolution of the universe obeys a pre-established plan. The order of the world is thus an order in becoming and

this becoming obeys a divine or cosmic law which leaves nothing to accident, or which makes use
of accident to arrive at its ends. According to this principle, the meaning of the universe is to be
found in the existence of man. We know how Baha'u'llah conceives of this question: man was
created so that in the creation there would exist a creature capable of knowing his Creator.
Baha'u'llah writes:
GL:CLXI:340

"Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct
operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique
distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be
regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of
creation..."388

Deprived of this purpose, the existence of the universe would lose its meaning. By 'man' we do
not need necessarily to understand humankind, but rather an intelligence. This intelligence
existed before the terrestrial man, for Baha'u'llah says that at all times, in a creation which has
never known a beginning, there has existed one who knows the Creator. This intelligence
constitutes a sort of cosmic principle, an anthropic spirit able to take on diverse forms, for we are
not the only agents with consciousness in the universe389, and furthermore, in every age, this
consciousness capable of knowing its Creator must have existed in one form or another. We are
not even sure that the material form that this consciousness assumes in this world is unique and
the possibility that it may be manifest in a purely spiritual form cannot be excluded.

Man is thus the crown of creation. We will return to this point in speaking of the ontology of the
spirit, for, if he occupies this position, it is because he is the highest manifestation of the spirit in
this universe and it is because of this position that he is found at the junction of the material
world and the spiritual world.

Consequently, in the Baha'i perspective, the teleological principle is inseparable from the anthropic principle:

"The universe is such as it is because if the universe was different, man would not exist."390

To this well known principle, Baha'u'llah adds: "And if man did not exist the universe would be impossible."

The principle of the man-macrocosm thus signifies that man is the measure of all things in the sense that it is in man that is found the key of the universe. Only through knowing himself can

GL:XXVII:65 (also see GL:XXIX:70)
Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Know thou that every fixed star hath its own planets, and every planet its own creatures, whose number no man can compute." (GL:LXXXII:163) It is certainly not necessary to emphasize that in the epoch that Bahá'u'lláh wrote these words, this point of view was singularly in advance of its time, and was opposed to the Ptolemaic system then established in Islamic culture.
The anthropic principle is based on the observation that the existence of the universe, such as it is, is based on the existence of a certain number of fundamental physical constants, extremely narrow and precise, which maintain the universe in equilibrium. If but one of these constants were to take on a different value the existence of this universe would become impossible and thus also impossible observation of this universe, for we could not be there to see it. The presence of observers in the universe assumes that these observers are compatible with their own existence. It imposes a priori a certain number of constraints upon the conditions which governed at its origin the moment of the appearance of the first singularity.

man know the world.

3. The theophany of the divine Names

The principle of the man-macrocosm has a second meaning that is related to the theology of the divine Names—everything is a manifestation of the divine names, and creation

is thus a
theophany. Baha'u'llah constantly affirms that the sky, the sun, the sea, the desert testify to the
grandeur of God:

"Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the
revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom
are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great
Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. How
resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans
of wisdom that surge within a drop!"391

The universe in its totality testifies of its Creator and reveals His signs:

"He Who is the Eternal Truth is the one Power Who exerciseth undisputed sovereignty
over the world of being, Whose image is reflected in the mirror of the entire creation."392

Elsewhere, Baha'u'llah writes:

"He is really a believer in the Unity of God who recognizeth in each and every created
thing the sign of the revelation of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, and not he who
maintaineth that the creature is indistinguishable from the Creator."393

All these citations show that Baha'u'llah considers every created thing as a manifestation of the
divine attributes. However, every thing manifests these attributes according to its own rank and
capacity. From this is derived the order of the universe, and this order implies a hierarchy which
is not organized according to the superiority of one thing over another, but rather by virtue of
the function of its role and capacity for "service". Ultimately all created things are created for the
"service" of the Creator. This idea that things are distinguished according to the resplendency of
the divine attributes reflected in them, is attested by this citation:

"From the exalted source, and out of the essence of His favor and bounty He hath
entrusted every created thing with a sign of His knowledge, so that none of His creatures

may be deprived of its share in expressing, each according to its capacity and rank, this knowledge. This sign is the mirror of His beauty in the world of creation. The greater the effort exerted for the refinement of this sublime and noble mirror, the more faithfully will it be made to reflect the glory of the names and attributes of God, and reveal the wonders

KI:#107:100-101; GL:XC:177
GL:LXXXIV:166
GL:XCIII:188

of His signs and knowledge. Every created thing will be enabled (so great is this reflecting power) to reveal the potentialities of its pre-ordained station, will recognize its capacity and limitations, and will testify to the truth that 'He, verily, is God; there is none other God besides Him.'...”394

These verses incline us take note of the extraordinary density characterizing the thought of Baha’u’llah. To attempt an exhaustive commentary on these few lines would require pages and indeed chapters which would far exceed the boundaries of our modest study. The interpretation of this passage relies upon the meaning of the expression “all things”. The concept of “all things” (kullu shay) is found throughout the writings of the Bab, who gives this expression an esoteric and mystical meaning.xvii Without doubt, these words have a dual value: the obvious meaning that relates “all things” to the totality of creation, and the spiritual meaning that makes of “all things” a recapitulation of creation. Here we see the appearance of a concept of rank which distinguishes things amongst themselves, and we also see in the linking of these things with each other both the theology of Names and the speculative theology to which we have already made allusion in previous chapters.

It seems to us that this text includes a third idea which up to the present seems to have been totally neglected: the entire universe, and not man alone, is animated by its movement towards

perfection. The world in itself as creation of God is perfect, but this is only a perfection of potentiality. This concept of the movement towards perfection reconciles the two fundamental ideas of Baha'u'llah regarding Nature: on the one hand Nature is the incarnation of the Names of God; on the other hand Nature is imperfect and has need of a guardian (vali), a gardener (man) to bring it to its state of perfection, even as man has need of a divine educator in order to develop his spiritual nature. This concept indicates that the position of man in relation to the world of Nature is similar to that of the Manifestation of God in relation to the human world. Man is the divine manifestation for the world of Nature. He is its prophet. He has been made the Regent of this world. To recapitulate, this movement towards perfection is universal. It affects the cosmic forces at work in the galaxies just as much as the secrets of evolution concealed in the DNA.
These considerations regarding a universal evolutionary law toward infinite perfection are surprising, and philosophy and science have no yet measured their depth.

Here we see the second meaning of identifying man with the macrocosm. If every created thing has a rank and if this rank depends upon the measure to which this thing reflects the names and attributes of God, then man, as the manifestation of the anthropic spirit, is found at the summit of creation and he is the macrocosm. He reflects a greater measure of the divine names and attributes than all the rest of the universe. He is the recapitulation of the universe and that which gives it meaning. He is the universal hermetic principle.

4. Hermetics and anagogical interpretation

To affirm that the writings of Baha'u'llah are written in a symbolic language immediately poses the question of how these symbols are to be interpreted. It has often been believed in the past that Baha'u'llah rejected all forms of hermetic interpretation (ta'wil), but in fact rather than

rejecting them, he merely limited their usage. It is true that Baha'u'llah

treats ta'wil with much
reserve. The reason is that during his lifetime, the excessive frequency and the lax character of
the employment of ta'wil had virtually ruined every serious form of Islamic exegesis. Thus, in the
“Book of Certitude”, he states:

“And yet, they have sought the interpretation of the Book from those that are wrapt in
veils, and have refused to seek enlightenment from the fountainhead of knowledge.”395

It is true that ta'wil plays an important role in Ithna 'Ashari Shi'i Islam. Let us trace the roots of
that role. We know that the so-called “hermetic” methods of exegesis were born in Greece in the
fifth century before the Common Era in the Pythagorean schools. In that era, the Greeks
apparently became scandalized by the behavior of the gods and the heroes of the Homeric age,
and they wished to interpret their behavior according to a hidden symbolic meaning which had
to be deciphered. Theogenes of Rhegium was the first to suggest a symbolic interpretation of the
Homeric poems. After him, Anthistenes made of Ulysses the prototype of a sage, and Metrodore
of Lampsaque invented an interpretive key in which the heroes and the gods incarnated either
forces of nature or states of the human soul. These methods acquired considerable success in
antiquity and were applied subsequently to the Annaeus of Virgil, to the Sibiline Oracles and to
the Chaldaean Oracles. It is in the city of Alexandria in Egypt that the method was transmitted
from Greek philosophers to Jewish rabbis who found the same problems in the Bible which the
Greeks had earlier discovered in Homer. For example, how were they to admit that Lot could
have committed incest with his daughters, or that David could have stooped to adultery? Philo of
Alexandria was the first Jewish commentator to make use of the hermetic methods in order to
resolve such difficulties, and it is through his intermediation that these methods penetrated into
Christianity and then Islam. In Christianity the introduction of this method was not without
problems and resulted in the third century violent opposition between the School of Alexandria

(Clement and Origen) and the School of Antioch (Theodore of Mopsueste and Theodoret of
Cyr). While it may have owed its initial inspiration to Christian transmission, Muslim taw'il gives
every indication of being wholly independent of Christian hermetics. These methods were used
with much reserve by the Sunni Muslim theologians. It was mostly the Sufis and then the
Isma'ilis who gave taw'il such importance that it became, in Iranian Shi'ism, virtually the only
exegetical method.

The concept of ta'wil is itself a Qur'anic concept, as indicated in the Surat al-'Imran:

“He it is Who hath sent down to thee the Book; in it there are verses that are clear
[muh.kamat] in meaning—they are the basis of the Book—and there are others that are
ambivalent (mutashabihat]. Those whose hearts are inclined towards deviation follow the
ambivalent verses because of their love of sedition and out of desire to interpret for
themselves (itighaa ta'wilihi). But none knows their interpretation (ta'wilahu) except God
and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge (rasikun). They say, 'We believe in it;
the whole is from our Lord.' And none heed except those gifted with understanding.”396

KI:#16:17
Qur'an, Suratu'l-'Imran, III:7

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The Qur'an does not disallow ta'wil. Nevertheless, it is possible that ta'wil in the Qur'an did not
have the meaning that was given to it by Islamic exegetes in later centuries.

5. The active imagination in the spiritual vision

In Ithna 'Ashari and Isma'ili Shi'i practice, ta'wil became an interpretive exercise which
increasingly distanced itself from the literal meaning of words, and ended in considering the
“letter” as of negligible importance. Its adepts believed that the Qur'an descended from heaven
through the axis of revelation (nubuwwa) and that is must, in order to be understood, be returned
to heaven through the axis of ta'wil. According to them, the word ta'wil comes

from the Arabic word “first” (awwal) and signifies “to return to its source”. In order to return the Qur'an to its source, one must elevate oneself to the heavens. Ta'wil thus takes on the allure of an initiatory journey. In Persia, ta'wil was particularly influenced by the theory of imagination of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and generally by Ibn al-'Arabi. In their conceptual universe, the purpose of Ta'wil is to give access to Malakut, conceived as the “interworld” (barzakh) and the Imaginal World ('alam-i-mithal). The imaginative faculty must elevate itself above the terrestrial realm (mulk) in order to transcend the senses and attain the point of consciousness in which corporeal beings are spiritualized into autonomous forms and images.

Now the problem is to be able to distinguish the true imaginative faculty, which is pure intellectual perception of the spiritual realities, from the bitter fruits of terrestrial imagination, which is distorted by the subjectivity of the ego, often pluralized by Baha'u'llah in the expression “vain imaginations” (awham). Shi'ism stumbled upon this problem without ever being able to resolve it. The fantastical usage of ta'wil, linked to a no less fantastical usage of ijtihad (juridical interpretation of texts), resulted, by the 18th century CE, in the disappearance of any norm in the Islamic religious sciences and the emergence of a crowd of local “mujtahidun” (learned interpreters of the law) all of whom claimed a share of illumination. This precipitated the progressive disappearance of every form of religious orthodoxy and the installation of the system of taqlid (imitation). This system enjoined upon each believer the obligation to identify himself as the imitator (muqalid) of a mujtahid who became thereby the “focal point of initiation” (marja'-i-taqlid) and all of whose decisions he was obliged to follow. The installation of this system took place during the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, during the rivalry between the Akhbari and Usuli schools of jurisprudence. The Akhbari school based its legal rulings on the unambiguous verses of the Qur'an and hadith (oral teachings traditionally associated with the prophet Muhammad and

the Twelve Imams), leaving matters that were not covered by these two divine sources to civil courts. The Usulis evolved a very elaborate system called ijtihad to arrive at legal decisions (fatwas), and their rulings pertained to every conceivable matter, public or private, secular or religious.

From that period on, the organization of the Shi'i clergy took on a quasi-feudal character, as each mujtahid was obligated to become the imitator of a mujtahid greater than himself. At the summit of these mujtahidun, were placed the Ayatu'llah-i-'Uzma (great Ayatu'llah). This system of imitation (taqlid) was severely condemned by Baha'u'llah in the "Most Holy Book" (Kitab-i-Aqdas) and other writings. It was in reference to this practice that Baha'u'llah frequently reiterates this cardinal principle of his teaching—whoever wishes to follow him must forget everything he has learned from his masters and from his forefathers, and break all attachment to any human doctrine whatsoever in order to undertake his own personal and individual investigation of the truth.

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The psychology of Baha'u'llah is very different from the systems which preceded it. Contrary to what certain ones have believed, Baha'u'llah does not negate the role of the imagination—he simply disapproves of a certain expression of that faculty and asserts a redefinition of its meaning.

If by "imagination" we mean the faculty of grasping the spiritual realities which exist in the superior worlds and particularly in Malakut, either directly, or through the intermediation of the divine Word contained in the sacred writings, then this faculty exists. It is what Baha'u'llah calls the "heart" in some contexts, and in others, "spiritual vision" (basira). There is however a fundamental difference between the creative imagination of Ibn Sina or Ibn al-'Arabi and the kind of imagination depicted by Baha'u'llah. Whereas the visionary imagination aims at grasping the global verities for which hermeneutics (ta'wil) must have a universal bearing, the "spiritual vision" defined by Baha'u'llah aims at grasping the verities which hermeneutics can not have in itself, a personal understanding commensurate with the degree of development of

the individual
who produce hermeneutics, and this negates all universal bearing.

This is the deeper meaning of the “Tablet of all Food” in particular. Not only is there an
hermeneutical meaning for each word in every world, but the perception of this world, and of the
meaning of the divine utterance, is conditioned by the spiritual state in which the seeker finds
himself at any given moment. We will see that this position has important philosophical
consequences which link the spiritual expansion of man with the establishment of his
psychological autonomy.

To understand the meaning of the sacred writings it is regarded as indispensable that one elevate
oneself from one's terrestrial condition and ascend into the heavens of spiritual meaning (ma'ani).
The spirit of the visionary is thus described by Baha’u’llah as a spirit soaring in infinite spaces.

6. Esoteric and Exoteric

Baha’u’llah carefully distinguishes between the exoteric (zahir) and the esoteric (batin) meanings
of Scripture, even though he rarely uses this particular terminology. There is correspondence
between the exoteric meaning and the exegetical commentary (tafsir). And there is
correspondence between the esoteric meaning and the hermeneutical commentary (ta'wil) which
one can only understand through the purification of the heart. Tafsir is permitted without reserve,
ta'wil must have a limited usage. But above all, what matters to Baha’u’llah, is that the exoteric
meaning not be sacrificed for the esoteric meaning. He treats this theme directly in Surat wa'l-
Shams397. He begins by affirming that the exegetes of the Qur'an are of two kinds: Those who
have neglected the exoteric in order to devote themselves exclusively to esotericism, and those
who have neglected the esoteric in order to consecrate themselves uniquely to the exoteric. The
two are both in error. Those who do not satisfy the exoteric are “ignorant” (jahil), while those
who have abandoned the exoteric for esotericism are “negligent” (ghafil). Only he who has
neglected neither of these two meanings and who has grasped the divine Word in

its totality can
be considered a true believer ('ibad).

How are we to understand his reference to the “exoteric” and the
“esoteric”? It seems that in the
writings of Baha’u’llah the word “exoteric” (zahir) refers to two
things: the literal meaning of the
Majmu'ih, p. 11

text and the observance of the religious laws. These are matters which are
within the grasp of
anyone with a minimum of intelligence.

Baha'u’llah asserts that no one can grasp the esoteric meaning of the Word if
he has not already
understood the literal import of the text. Ta'wil can not annul the obvious
meaning. The former
is a stepping-stone destined to move us to traverse the first degrees of the
ascension. It represents
the formal aspect of religion and in particular the laws of personal status
(tashri') such as prayer,
fasting and other spiritual observances, as well as all the subsidiary laws
which aim at preserving
the dignity of man and securing for him a mode of behavior which conforms to
divine ethics. His
criticism of those who have abandoned the exoteric for the esoteric was
initially aimed at certain
categories of Sufis who believed that the practice of their spiritual exercises
(dhikr, for example)
exempted them from the obligation to observe the religious laws binding on all
other Muslims,
and who for this reason did not fear to indulge in a dissolute life, consuming
alcohol and using
drugs. Other religious leaders, especially among the orthodox clergy of Islam,
imagined that they
had arrived at such a high degree of religious attainment, that they were
justified in requiring
extraordinary demonstrations of devotion from their followers and in exempting
them from
revealed laws at their beck and call.

In the opening paragraph of the “Most Holy Book”398, Baha’u’llah gives
his “first” teaching,
which is that the basis of spiritual life rests upon twin indispensable
obligations—the recognition
of the divine Manifestation, and the observance of whatsoever is revealed by
himxviii. Baha’u’llah

insists that these twins are without value without each other. Recognition of the Manifestation of
God does not bring any spiritual benefit if one does not conform to his teachings. This approach
challenges the conviction of most Christians and Muslims who are persuaded that it is sufficient
to simply believe in Jesus the Christ or in Muhammad the Seal of the Prophets in order to be
saved, and that faith is superior to acts.

On the other hand, no one can claim to live a pious life if he has not, personally, recognized the
divine Manifestation. We touch here upon the meaning of esoteric (batin) as the term is employed
by Baha'u'llah. Recognition of the Manifestation of God is not synonymous with claiming the
religious title of Christian, Muslim, or Baha'i. Rather it signifies having established a personal
and intimate liaison with the Prophet similar to the familiarity one would have after having lived
with someone for a long time in a committed, intimate relationship. It is only through this
intimate relationship that one can gain access to the esoteric (batin) meaning of texts and thus to
their hermeneutic (ta'wil).

7. The limits of spiritual hermeneutic

Baha'u'llah fixed three limits to hermeneutic (ta'wil). The first two limits exclude two domains—
the realm of the Prophets and the promulgation of the laws (tashri') of personal behavior. The
third limit corresponds to the individual authenticity rather than to the normative character of all
unconstrained hermeneutic meanings. In the "Book of Certitude", Baha'u'llah declares:

"It is obvious and manifest that the true meaning of the utterances of the Birds of Eternity
is revealed to none except those that manifest the Eternal Being, and the melodies of the

398Translator's Note: Kitab-i-Aqdas.

Nightingale of Holiness can reach no ear save that of the denizens of the everlasting
realm."399
This text indicates the great reserve of Baha'u'llah towards ta'wil, such

reserve as reminds us of
what we have discovered in the Qur'an. This condemnation of rampant ta'wil refers essentially to
the interpretation of Scriptural prophecies, one of the principle objectives if the “Book of
Certitude”. It can also be extended to other domains. The only true ta'wil is that which emanates
from the pen of the Manifestations of God. Each revelation is composed of a direct and exoteric
teaching and a veiled and hidden teaching. It belongs to each Prophet to reveal the ta'wil of His
own revelation as well as the ta'wil of preceding revelations. Baha’u’llah writes in the “Book of
Certitude”:

“It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven [huwiyyih] and Doves of Eternity
[azaliyyih] speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language [zahir], is
devoid of allusions [ramz], is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and
a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may
advance into the realm of eternal reunion. Such are the unveiled traditions and the
evident verses already mentioned. The other language is veiled and concealed, so that
whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their
innermost being be disclosed. Thus hath Sádiq, son of Muhammad, spoken: “God verily
will test them and sift them.” This is the divine standard, this is the Touchstone of God,
wherewith He proveth His servants. None apprehendeth the meaning of these utterances
except them whose hearts are assured, whose souls have found favour with God, and
whose minds are detached from all else but Him. In such utterances, the literal meaning,
as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended.”400

The signs of the “final judgment”, of the great parousia, of the “resurrection” which are described
in the New Testament and in the Qur'an were not meant to be among the exoteric teachings.
Their true meaning was veiled and impenetrable, “sealed” (makhtum) even as precious wine is
sealed in the camphor flasks until it matures. Alone, the hand of the Prophet

is endowed, as in
the Apocalypse of John, with the power to break the seals and to reveal that which was hidden
from the consciousness of men. Even when a few perspicacious spirits with the permission of God
are able to approach the true meaning of the prophecies, all other men remained deprived of the
awareness of how they may distinguish truth from error. It is in order to alleviate this
heedlessness that the writings of the Bab constitute a single ta'wil.

Baha'u'llah likewise consecrated a portion of his writings to ta'wil. The "Book of Certitude" is
essentially a long ta'wil. We will give only a few examples from it to demonstrate the
characteristics of his interpretation. Included therein is a commentary upon a passage in the
Gospel which says: "…the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the
stars shall fall from heaven…"401 Baha'u'llah begins by explaining that the word "sun" has
various meanings. Sometimes it means "those Suns of Truth Who rise from the dayspring of

KI:#16:17
Literally this reads: "…this latter language excludes the exoteric."
KI:#283:254-255
Gospel of Matthew 24:29 (see also Mark 13:24-25; Luke 21:25)

ancient glory, and fill the world with a liberal effusion of grace from on high"402, referring to the
Manifestations of God. Baha'u'llah then develops this idea by comparing the influence of the
physical sun upon earthly life with the influence of the divine Manifestations upon the hearts of
men. "It is the warmth that these Luminaries of God generate, and the undying fires they kindle,
which cause the light of the love of God to burn fiercely in the heart of humanity."403 Through
them, "the Spirit of life everlasting is breathed into the bodies of the dead."404 Baha'u'llah then
proceeds to explain a more philosophical meaning of the same word:

"That these divine Luminaries seem to be confined at times to specific designations and
attributes, as you have observed and are now observing, is due solely to the imperfect and

limited comprehension of certain minds. Otherwise, they have been at all times, and will
through eternity continue to be, exalted above every praising name, and sanctified from
every descriptive attribute. The quintessence of every name can hope for no access unto
their court of holiness, and the highest and purest of all attributes can never approach
their kingdom of glory."405

Then, Baha'u'llah explains that in other texts, the word "sun" has a different meaning. In the
"Prayer of Nudbih", which commemorates the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn, the word "sun"
designates the holy Imams.406 Baha'u'llah summarises the multiple meanings cited thus far:

"Thus, it hath become evident that the terms "sun," "moon," and "stars" primarily
signify the Prophets of God, the saints, and their companions, those Luminaries, the light
of Whose knowledge hath shed illumination upon the worlds of the visible and the
invisible."407

Later on in the text, he gives another meaning to the words "sun" and "moon", indicating that in
some contexts they designate religious leaders, for it is they who, after the death of the Prophet,
are entrusted with illumining the heaven of religion. Thus, when the sacred writings speak of the
"darkening of the sun" this designates the end of great religious leaders such as the caliphate
(khalifat) or the abasement of the pontifical power. This explains the verse of the Qur'an: "Verily,
the sun and the moon are both condemned to the torment of infernal fire."408 Baha'u'llah
continues:

"In another sense, by the terms "sun', 'moon', and 'stars' are meant such laws and
teachings as have been established and proclaimed in every Dispensation, such as the
laws of prayer and fasting."409

KI:#31:33
KI:#31:34
KI:#31:34
KI:#20:21

KI:#33:35
KI:#33:36
Qur'an 55:5; cited in KI:#36:37
KI:#38:38

Further on, he adds:

“Moreover, in the traditions the terms “sun” and “moon” have been applied to prayer and fasting…”410

Finally, he concludes:

“This is the purpose underlying the symbolic words of the Manifestations of God. Consequently, the application of the terms “sun” and “moon” to the things already mentioned hath been demonstrated and justified by the text of the sacred verses and the recorded traditions. Hence, it is clear and manifest that by the words “the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven” is intended the waywardness of the divines, and the annulment of laws firmly established by divine Revelation, all of which, in symbolic language, have been foreshadowed by the Manifestation of God. None except the righteous shall partake of this cup, none but the godly can share therein. “The righteous shall drink of a cup tempered at the camphor fountain.”411

“It is unquestionable that in every succeeding Revelation the “sun” and “moon” of the teachings, laws, commandments, and prohibitions which have been established in the preceding Dispensation, and which have overshadowed the people of that age, become darkened, that is, are exhausted, and cease to exert their influence.”412

In the “Tafsir Surat wa'l-Shams”, Baha’u’llah takes up the same theme and here he elaborates on the various meanings of the word “sun”, addressing questions which are more metaphysical than exegetical in nature. In speaking of the “sun of divinity” (uluhiyya), the “sun of guardianship” (wilayya), the “sun of will” (mashiyya), and the “sun of volition”

(irada), Baha'u'llah explains also the meaning of the word "night" and the word "heaven". To give some examples, he cites the "heaven of the symbolic sense" (ma'ani), the "heaven of knowledge" (ma'rifat), the "mystical heaven" ('irfan), the "heaven of religion" (din), the "heaven of science" ('ilm), the "heaven of wisdom" [hikmat], the "heaven of grandeur" ['aZamat], the "heaven of elevation" ['ala], the "heaven of splendor" (ijlal), and so forth.413

We have only reported these several examples of Baha'u'llah's ta'wil in order to give illustrations of his method. It is the same method which we have earlier encountered in the "Tablet of all Food" regarding the divine worlds. Thus we can say that in the writings of Baha'u'llah the word "world" has three types of meaning: an empirical meaning which is addressed to the independent reality of man; an ontological meaning which we have already explored at length; and a hermeneutical meaning. In this fashion, it is possible to say that for every world there is a heaven and a sun. We will point out what this hermeneutical method has in common with the

KI:#40:39
Qur'an 76:5
KI:#41-42:41
Majmu'ih, p. 12

anagogical reading developed in a Christian context by the School of Alexandria. Certain exegeses of Baha'u'llah would not have been rejected by Clement of Alexandria or by Origen. Nevertheless, Baha'u'llah takes care never to break the link between the ontological description and the hermeneutical description. They are as inseparable as the exoteric is from the esoteric and vice versa. We also begin to see that for Baha'u'llah, there is always a corresponding hermeneutical aspect in all the universe, whether the physical or the spiritual world.

We see thus what importance ta'wil has in the work of Baha'u'llah. But this ta'wil does not stand alone. His ta'wil is always linked to an eschatological thought. The primordial

function of ta'wil is
to explain the signs of the new Manifestation and to demonstrate his power. Through ta'wil the
sacred Books are revealed anew. This is notably the case with the Qur'an through the very
numerous commentaries (tafsir) given it by the Bab. It is important to comprehend this concept of
'second revelation', otherwise it becomes impossible to grasp the link which can unite the tafsir of
the Bab and of Baha'u'llah. Certain Islamicists have been astonished by the extremely relaxed
link with which their commentaries are related to primary texts. This is to entirely misunderstand
the hermeneutical function of these commentaries. Their purpose is not to unveil a secret and
esoteric meaning, but to make manifest a sense of "actualization" in the new Revelation.

If ta'wil is a function of Revelation, we understand why Baha'u'llah reserves the usage thereof to
Prophets and their chosen interpreters. If he rejects human ta'wil, it is not in order to contest the
value of taw'il in itself, but because all human ta'wil can have but a secondary standing before the
divinely revealed ta'wil.

8. The legitimacy of the outward meaning

The second domain from which Baha'u'llah excludes ta'wil is that of the religious laws (shari'a;
tashri'). Perhaps no use of ta'wil in religious practice receives a more severe condemnation, for the
application of ta'wil to this domain engenders turning away from the observance of religious laws,
the loss of orthodoxy, and the introduction of a subjectivism which risks bringing about the
breaking up of all social norms. This critique goes in two directions: on the one hand, as we have
already indicated, it refers to those Sufis who have employed ta'wil to free themselves from
religious laws, and, on the other hand, it points to the mujtahidun, the doctors of law, who by their
loose and subjective interpretations have turned the sacred law to their personal profit.
Baha'u'llah insists that the laws must be understood and obeyed in their most evident and clear
outward meaning. This does not mean that these laws do not contain hidden meanings, but that

these hidden meanings cannot subsist except through dependence upon the outward meaning.

Do these two limitations upon ta'wil so narrow its domain that it should be considered as definitively forbidden? Far from this! But perhaps this allowance merely a concession to human weakness. The only verses which are open to the subjective interpretation of the individual believer are the purely spiritual texts which concern the development of the interior life. Nevertheless, here again, Baha'u'llah cites restrictions. The interpretation of the individual can not have any normative capacity—it must remain personal to each believer, even if he has a right within certain limits to express himself in public. This personal interpretation, which represents the only legitimate form of human ta'wil, is based upon the idea that there is an understanding of the sacred writings which corresponds to each spiritual state traversed by the believer. In

proportion to and according to the measure of our progress in spiritual development, new meanings are illumined for us, but these meanings are personal and it would be erroneous for us to believe that these meanings have a universal application. Their only value is in their correspondence with the lived state. To share our vision of the writings from the standpoint of our spiritual state can be enriching, but to wish to give to these interpretations a normative power would be dangerous, for this would interfere with the spiritual development of other believers.
'Abdu'l-Baha expressed this principle in the following words:

"The text of the Divine Book is this: If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the Divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong."414

The texts which remain open to personal interpretations are those like the "Hidden Words" or the "Seven Valleys" which depict the mystic states. A practice, which is no doubt destined to assume an important place in the development of Baha'i mysticism, consists of assembling a group to read a passage from the "Hidden Words" which is then liberally

commented upon by
each member of the group, taking care to avoid all opposition of point of view and all debate
because, by definition, the interpretation has only value for the person who voices it but might
nevertheless contribute to the enrichment of others.

We return finally to this fundamental principle, affirmed in the “Seven Valleys”, that the
differences which the voyager perceives in the different divine worlds derive from the condition
of the seeker himself:

“It is clear to thine Eminence that all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his
journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision.”415

9. A Baha’i Theosophy

We have examined the hermeneutical influence of the hierarchy of divine worlds in the writings
of Baha’u’llah. However, we must not suppose that in developing his metaphysical system,
Baha’u’llah is aiming only to address the hermeneutical aspect of gnosis or that he entirely
renounces any attempt to depict the empirical reality of the universe. This empirical reality is as
much present in the work of Baha’u’llah as an enquiry into spiritual realities, and indeed, he aims
at creating a bridge between the two. It is in this sense that we affirm that the thought of
Baha’u’llah presents itself as a true theosophy. Of course we use the word theosophy in its
technical sense.416

Three elements must be brought together to constitute a theosophy: a gnosis, a hermeneutic and
a philosophy of Nature. Theosophy is thus the search for the ultimate reality of man and the

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Tablets of the Divine Plan”, p. 56; “Bahá’í World Faith”, p. 428.
Bahá’u’lláh, “Seven Valleys”, p. 18.
For the technical sense of the word “theosophy” we invite the reader to peruse the remarkable article
entitled “Theosophie” by Antoine Faivre in the “Encyclopedia Universalis”, volume XVII, pp. 1118-
1120.

universe through an initiatory voyage involving the metamorphosis of the human soul and the transformation of the interior being. This gnosis, as the acquisition of the knowledge of divine things, can not be based upon anything other than the transformational power of the revealed Word. This power is experienced in exposure to the Word through prayer and meditation.

Theosophy aims at establishing a rapport between the sacred Books, the celestial hierarchies and the empirical reality of Nature in its aspect as the manifestation of the divine signs. This rapport cannot be effected except by means of a hermeneutic which links the natural manifestations to spiritual meanings reflecting the general laws of the creation and the hidden order of the world.

This theosophical enterprise relies upon an interior illumination associated with a rational process which permits the exploration of the links between the different material and spiritual worlds.

Theosophy starts from the principle that the reality of the universe is not limited to a single empirical reality. A hidden reality, more vast than this empirical reality, exists which can be divined through its signs in the empirical world. However, a simple speculative or experimental experience does not suffice to access this hidden reality. Its comprehension requires of man a whole-scale uprooting from his terrestrial condition, so as to reformulate his knowledge of sensible nature, and to leave behind his acquired earthly knowledge so that he might discern through the signs of the real the traces of a much more vast reality. It is in this sense that theosophy assumes a true philosophy of nature, for it is the natural order which permits us to glimpse the celestial order.

10. The supreme Talisman

Baha'u'llah affirms that "man is the supreme Talisman."[417] This phrase is generally misunderstood due to ignorance of the technical meaning of "talisman" (tilism).[418] The word in Arabic and in Persian may designate a magical object which is seen as attracting or repulsing

fate, and it can also reveal another meaning. In Persian the talisman is the chalice, the goblet of
King Jamshid (jam-i-jam). In a legend it is stated that his desire to possess this chalice impelled
Alexander the Great to undertake his conquest of the world. The chalice of Jamshid had a special
characteristic—upon looking into it one could see anything of the world. Thus when Baha'u'llah
asserts that man is "the supreme Talisman" the meaning implied is that by looking into man one
can see the recapitulation of the whole of creation, that is to say, the most perfect manifestation
of the divine Names and attributes. This is what is affirmed by Baha'u'llah in numerous Tablets:

"Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of
His names, and made it the recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the
reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes,
and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled
out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty."419
TB:161; GL:CXXII:259
The Arabic word tilism, pronounced telesm in Persian, comes from the Greek telesma, meaning "rite".
The word seems to have been transmitted to the Islamic world through the intermediation of the great
magicians of the second and third centuries CE and perhaps by Proclus (411-485 CE).
GL:XXVII:65

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"Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the
revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom
are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great
Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. How
resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans
of wisdom that surge within a drop!

"To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been

invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinctions. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him."420

"Man, the noblest and most perfect of all created things, excelleth them all in the intensity of this revelation, and is a fuller expression of its glory."421

11. Man as the foundation of knowledge

It is as the manifestation of the divine glory in the created world that man expresses his macrocosmic function in the world of creation, and it is because he is the creature which has the greatest capacity to reflect the divine Names that he can be considered the recapitulation of the entire creation and the one creature who gives it meaning as its universal hermeneutical principle. There is another significance of the concept of the "supreme Talisman". In Persian tradition, a talisman is a magical instrument which, like the chalice of Jamshid cited above, permits one to access universal knowledge (symbolic knowledge of what is happening in every place and at every moment). To say therefore that man is the "supreme Talisman" reaffirms that universal knowledge is found in man, that he is the source thereof, even if this knowledge remains hidden and seems inaccessible to him. We find ourselves face to face with a fundamental concept of Baha'i epistemology. The foundation of knowledge is found in man himself. Nothing outside of man can guarantee the total intelligibility of the universe. There does not exist, in objective reality exterior to man, a principle that guarantees the foundation of knowledge. That fact that it is man who is the foundation of knowledge and not an exterior reality follows directly from the idea that man is the macrocosm in relation to the universe as microcosm, and that he is the universal hermeneutical principle of this microcosm. This is a phenomenological approach all the implications of which have yet to be studied. However, this phenomenological concept of

knowledge and the world does not resemble the phenomenology of Husserl, in that it aims at
avoiding certain consequences of idealism and that does not renounce the discovery of reality in
the human self.

12. Knowledge of self and knowledge of God

KI:#107:100-101; GL:XC:177
KI:#107:101; GL:XC:177

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We see how the knowledge of the essence of man leads us to the knowledge of the world, but we
also see how this knowledge of the world and of the universe is inseparable from the knowledge
of God. Baha'u'llah often took up and interpreted the famous tradition (hadith) of Muhammad:
"He has known God who has known himself." 422 It was furthermore affirmed by 'Abdu'l-Baha
in one of his Tablets423, that it is impossible for a man who does not know God to know himself,
for the knowledge of God is like the light of the sun which permits us to see. To wish to know
oneself without knowing God, is like wanting to recognize an object in the dark; in order to see
anything, one must first find a source of light.

This self knowledge is not identical to psychological knowledge. It is knowledge of true human
nature. And all Baha'i spirituality is based upon this tirelessly repeated fundamental principle:
"the nature of man is spiritual." It is thus that to know oneself one must recognize the "divine
deposit" in oneself. The whole stake here is to understand the meaning of the word "spiritual".

As Davudi pointed out, the idea that the knowledge of God is inseparable from the knowledge of
self implies that it is not possible for man to arrive at a complete and total knowledge of himself,
any more than it is possible for him to understand God in His plenitude.424 It is because perfect
knowledge of God and of ourselves is impossible that the universe cannot be totally intelligible to
us, that it will always contain mysteries. But it is also because man can not ever arrive at a total
knowledge of himself that it is possible to envision that the progress of the soul lasts for eternity.

The foundation and source then of all knowledge is hidden in obscurity. Man can approach this
foundation, but he can never master or control it.

13. The alchemy of the divine Elixir

No theme is more “theosophical” than that of alchemy and the transubstantiation of metals,
symbolic as they are of the interior transformation of man. The fact that this theme appears in
the writings of Baha’u’llah indicates the “gnostic” character of his teaching, and constitutes an
evidence that his thought must necessarily be interpreted as comprising a vast philosophy linking
the spiritual and psychological laws of the interior transformation of man to a philosophy of
Nature.

The alchemical tradition appears in the writings of Baha’u’llah as a theosophical theme, without
a direct link to the pragmatic enterprise which has occupied most alchemists, for whom the
“Great Work” was limited to the trans-substantiation of metals.425

In the civilization of Islam, the history of alchemy followed the same development as that of Neo-
Platonism. The first known alchemist is Bolos of Mendes who lived in the second century BCE,
and tradition derives his teaching from Democrites. Alchemy was joined to hermeticism in the

KI:#107:102-103; GL:XC:179
Makatib, volume I.
'Ali-Murad Davudi, “Uluviyyat va Mazhariyyat,” p. 88
425Translator’s Note: Dr. Keven Brown told me that Baha’u’llah wrote over forty Tablets about alchemy.

A few alchemically-themed passages are found in Gleanings and Kitab-i-Iqan.

syncretic Hellenistic culture of Alexandria in Egypt, and a prolific, hermetically-inspired
alchemical literature developed from this association. Zozim of Panopoles (circa third-fourth
century CE) was the first writer to closely link the acquisition of alchemical knowledge with a
philosophical and mystical search, establishing a whole series of symbolic concordances between
the two processes.426 The work of Zozim became the basis of alchemy to which all later

alchemists referred, including the Greeks, the Arabs and Persians, and finally, Europeans.
Alchemy was introduced into Islamic culture from the seventh century CE, and from the eleventh century CE onwards the great works of the Greek alchemists were translated into Arabic. This epoch is entirely dominated by the great alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan, an 'Iraqi Shi'ite born at the start of the eighth century CE who became the disciple of Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq in Medinah. What the Islamic world regards as the work of Jabir is in fact a vast literature which is the fruit of an entire school, the formulation of which was not completed until the tenth century CE, with the establishment of the famous theory of balances.427 The influence of this literature was considerable, both upon the development of Islamic science, or that of Islamic mysticism. The ideas of Jabir, completed by Razi and a long lineage of alchemist scholars, would remain dominant until the end of the nineteenth century CE, at which time they were still being taught in the theological schools.

Alchemy was part of the common culture and was the subject of passionate debate. This explains why one finds a certain number of passages in the work of Baha'u'llah concerning alchemy. It is in this context that Baha'u'llah speaks about the nature of alchemy.

Three ideas upon this subject are found in the writings of Baha'u'llah. First of all, Baha'u'llah does not reject the possibility of the transubstantiation of metals. He affirms the unity of matter composed of atoms, the combinations of which determine the properties of substances. For example, that which we perceive as gold or sulphur is but the properties of certain states of matter.

The second idea which Baha'u'llah advances is that the transsubstantiation of metals is only a theoretical possibility the practical application of which may remain forever outside the capacity of man. From this perspective, he indicates that those who devote themselves to alchemical studies are wasting their time, and those who claim to have completed the "Great Work" are

impostors. Baha’u’llah mocks the Shaykhi leader Haji Mirza Karim Khan-i-Kirmanixix, who, in his book “Guidance unto the Ignorant” (Irshadu'l-'Awwam)xx, claims that one needs to be master of no less than twenty sciences in order to understand the ascension of Muhammad, alchemy being one of those twenty. Karim Khan lets it be understood that he possesses this knowledge of alchemy to perfection and that he has himself accomplished the “Great Work”. Baha’u’llah writes:

“Among the sciences which this pretender hath professed is that of alchemy. We cherish the hope that either a king or a man of preeminent power may call upon him to translate this science from the realm of fancy to the domain of fact and from the plane of mere pretension to that of actual achievement. Would that this unlearned and humble Servant,

Please see: A. J. Festugiere, “La Revelation d'Hermes Trismegiste,” tome I, 2eme edition, Paris, 1983
Please see: Pierre Lori

who never laid any pretension to such things, nor even regarded them as the criterion of true knowledge, might undertake the same task, that thereby the truth might be known and distinguished from falsehood.”428

The third idea which is found in the writings of Baha’u’llah, and which rejoins Jabir and his school, is that alchemy has a metaphorical value in its description of the interior transformation of man. There exists on this point a passage in the “Book of Certitude” which treats of the spiritual transformation which is experienced by the disciples of the Prophets:

“It is evident that nothing short of this mystic transformation could cause such spirit and behaviour, so utterly unlike their previous habits and manners, to be made manifest in the world of being. For their agitation was turned into peace, their doubt into certitude, their timidity into courage. Such is the potency of the Divine Elixir (ikthir-i-ilahi), which, swift as the twinkling of an eye, transmuteth the souls of men!

“For instance, consider the substance of copper. Were it to be protected in its own mine
from becoming solidified, it would, within the space of seventy years, attain to the state of
gold. There are some, however, who maintain that copper itself is gold, which by
becoming solidified is in a diseased condition, and hath not therefore reached its own
state.

“Be that as it may, the real elixir (ikthir-i-kamil)429 will, in one instant, cause the substance
of copper to attain the state of gold, and will traverse the seventy-year stages in a single
moment. Could this gold be called copper? Could it be claimed that it hath not attained
the state of gold, whilst the touchstone is at hand to assay it and distinguish it from
copper?”430

It is of course a metaphor. Copper represents the soul of man and the seventy years represent the
terrestrial duration of human life. The mine is his body, representing the terrestrial world. If the
copper man does not succumb to the attachments of this world (solidification), then in him will be
manifested the divine qualities, that is to say, he will be transformed into gold.

“Likewise, these souls, through the potency of the Divine Elixir, traverse, in the twinkling
of an eye, the world of dust and advance into the realm of holiness; and with one step
cover the earth of limitations (makan-i-mahdud) and reach the domain of the Placeless (la-
makan-i-ilahi)431. It behooveth thee to exert thine utmost to attain unto this Elixir which, in
one fleeting breath, causeth the west of ignorance to reach the east of knowledge,
illuminates the darkness of night with the resplendence of the morn, guideth the wanderer
in the wilderness of doubt to the wellspring of the Divine Presence and Fount of certitude,

KI:#208:189-190
That is to say “the perfect elixir” (kamil). We know that the Manifestation of God is also called “the
perfect man” (insan-i-kamil).
KI:#164-166:156-157

La-makan is Utopos, the Land of Nowhere, the Na-kuja-Abad of Suhrawardi. It is the world of spiritual
intuition where the spirit discovers the hidden dimension of things. It is the vision of Malakut.

and conferreth upon mortal souls the honour of acceptance into the Ridván[432] of
immortality. Now, could this gold be thought to be copper, these people could likewise be
thought to be the same as before they were endowed with faith."[433]

CHAPTER NINE:
PHILOSOPHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF BAHA'I THEOSOPHY

We have shown that the teaching of Baha'u'llah corresponds to the technical exigencies of a
theosophy, but we may still question whether this teaching also possesses the spirit thereof. We
might be troubled by the insistence of certain Western historians and Orientalists who negate this
theosophical character. It is true that these ones generally have had only a very superficial
knowledge of the Baha'i writings, but we find in Iran a very similar critique, particularly coming out
of the mouths of the Shaykhis and certain Sufi orders. These Islamic testimonies are important
sources of misunderstandings which we must attempt to remove.

In the preceding Chapter we have set forth the positive elements which indicate to us that Baha'i
thought presents itself as a theosophy. This does not signify however that this Baha'i theosophy must
present itself in the same forms as the traditional theosophies. In the present Chapter we will show
the radical originality of the philosophy of Baha'u'llah by setting forth a certain number of essential
points in which Baha'i theosophy diverges fundamentally both in its organization and in its
expression from earlier theosophies. Far from being scandalized by this, we think that Baha'u'llah
revived theosophical thought in such a way as to provide the only means for its survival. This
affirmation obviously leads us to ask why there has been a divorce between philosophy and
theosophy in the West, a divorce that has led to a quasi-extinction of the latter, even though, until
the end of the Middle Ages, all the Western philosophical Schools were at the

same time
theosophical Schools. It would also be seemly that we inquire regarding the destiny of theosophy in
the East. Eastern theosophy is today far less brilliant than is said, for this theosophy presently admits
itself incapable of resisting the disenchantment of the world and the desacralization of the cosmos
which is brought about through the modes of social organization imported from the West.

1. Revelation and tradition

Here we encounter the unfolding of a battle. Some can not envision the Baha'i Faith as anything
other than a purely Iranian phenomenon, notwithstanding its universal message and its global
expansion. For them, the Baha'i Faith represents the last cutting blow to the bleeding edifice of

Ridvan is one of the names of Paradise. It is the name of the period of twelve days during which
Bahá'u'lláh announced his prophetic station for the first time to a small group of his followers. The
commemoration of this period is an annual occurrence for Bahá'ís. This announcement took place just
prior to Bahá'u'lláh's departure from Baghdad, and in the Najibiyyih garden on an island in the midst of
the Euphrates River, "subsequently designated by his followers as the Garden of Ridvan." (Shoghi
Effendi, "God Passes By", chapter IX, p. 151)
KI:#167:157-158; Persian text, Cairo version, pp. 122-123

Iranian metaphysics. These ones accuse the Baha'is of wishing to give the coup de grace to a
masterpiece in danger of disappearing and they implore them to renounce their spiritual and
philosophical ambitions and to join their forces to those of the traditionalists, in order to preserve a
nondenominational work and thereby to oppose the triumph of Western rationality. Not hearing the
response they had hoped for to their plea, they accuse the Baha'is of treason. But the Baha'is do not
stop affirming that their objectives are, ultimately, the same as those defended by the conservators of
tradition. They state however that humanity is in the midst of living a profound mutation. This
mutation is the result of a double process announced by Baha'u'llah: a

process of disintegration and
a process of reintegration into a new world order. In our time, these traditionalists and humanity as
a whole see only the process of disintegration. Many deplore the ruin of the family, the burgeoning
of drug addiction and violence, the impasse in economic development, the collapse of the social
order, the weakening of its institutions, the progress of materialism, and other ailments. However,
according to the Baha'i writings which, over a century ago, announced the onset of this catastrophic
process, the disappearance of the order of the world masks the emergence of a new order, the
appearance of a new consciousness and the evolution towards a new thinking. Baha'u'llah writes:
"Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead…The day is
approaching when We will have rolled up the world and all that is therein, and spread out a new
order in its stead."434 If the world has become so chaotic, it is because the old religions, the old
philosophies and even the new ideologies, do not have adequate responses to the problems of our
epoch. This does not diminish their merit and efficacy in the past. This general obsolescence, at the
dawn of a great transition towards a new cycle of civilization, naturally touches upon every religious
tradition. Certainly there are still numerous men who remain persuaded that these traditions retain
their value, men who derive a great profit therefrom, but we must admit that these traditions no
longer attract the masses and that they have lost their social authority.435 This is unassailable fact.
There is no point in lamenting that society has lost its sense of the sacred, that materialism has
removed itself from spirituality, that the new ideas have destroyed the ancient beliefs. If such things
have happened, it is because for a long time now the religious traditions have lost their guiding role.
We must renounce the antiquary's mentality which would have us regret the present and wish for
the past. The solution to our dilemma is not to be found in the scrupulous conservation of ancient
teachings, or the celebration of a lost unanimity, in the hope of bringing about a return to the past.
Rather than ceaselessly repairing the old house, which is ramshackle and on the verge of collapse, it

would be better to construct a new house, loftier, more spacious and responding more immediately
and consistently to the exigencies of the time. But, declares Baha'u'llah, the construction of this
greater habitation cannot be the work of man alone—only a divine Revelation can bring this into
existence. We must not forget that it is Revelation that is at the source of all these religious
traditions, and that Revelation alone can guide us in the present and into the future.

This does not mean that Baha'u'llah repudiates all tradition. According to him, in religion there is a
central core which is the foundation of all the Revelations and which never changes. Only the
comprehension that men have of this core changes. He declares in the Hidden Words:

GL:IV:7; WOB:161…CXLIII:313; WOB:161-162
Here we utilize the word "tradition" in its philosophical sense. Tradition is that by which we realize the
naturalization of man, which is to say his inscription into a particular society and culture and in history. By
"spiritual tradition" we understand not revelation but the totality of the values by which a religion has
sought to accomplish its process of historicization.

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"This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of
power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence
thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous,
that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfill in their lives His trust,
and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of divine virtue." 436

'Abdu'l-Baha also recognized that tradition constitutes one of the four fundamental sources of
human knowledge.437 But this does not signify that Revelation must remain the prisoner of tradition.
This principle is illustrated by an anecdote that is reported of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i. One day one
of his disciples asked him what was the word that the Promised One must speak on the Day of the
Resurrection, a word which, according to the traditions (hadith) would set in flight three hundred and

thirteen of the chiefs and powerful ones of the earth. The Shaykh replied to him it would be very presumptuous to claim to be capable of bearing the weight of a word destined to plunge the greatest sovereigns of the world into consternation. When the disciple insisted, the Shaykh asked him: “Were you to attain that Day, were you to be told to repudiate the guardianship of 'Ali and to denounce its validity, what would you say?”438 The disciple exclaimed that such a thing was impossible, for it was inconceivable that the Promised One would pronounce such words. The Shaykh replied that his faith was not sufficient, because it is written in the Qur'an: “God commandeth whatsoever He willeth…and God doeth whatsoever He willeth.”439 The Shaykh added that “Whoever hesitates, whoever, though it be for the twinkling of an eye or less, questions His authority, is deprived of His grace and is accounted of the fallen.”440 This anecdote shows the relations between Revelation and tradition. It replies in advance to those who would reject the teachings of the Bab and Baha’u’llah because certain aspects of these teachings are not in accord with tradition. Most pointedly, it would answer those who would make such arguments while adhering to the Shaykhi tradition, the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i and Siyyid Kazim Rashti.

The teaching of Baha’u’llah constitutes a Revelation of divine teaching. It is his role as the revealer to confirm or invalidate tradition. In the preceding Chapters we have seen many allusions to the Muslim, Greek and even Zoroastrian traditions in the writings of Baha’u’llah. Baha’u’llah could be conceived as continuing the great project of al-Ghazali and al-Suhrawardi, both of whom wished to demonstrate that the philosophers of Greece and the sages (magi) of Persia derived their inspiration from the same source as the Prophets. In this way they wished to unite the three great traditions of their time. But this union, without a Scriptural foundation and a normative authority could not be achieved in Islam. It is only in the writings of Baha’u’llah that it is openly realized on that basis.

2. The age of maturity

We have discussed the mutation of psychological structures announced by

Baha’u’llah and we will
now attempt to clarify the meaning of this mutation and to explore its
spiritual consequences.

AHW: Prelude
SAQ: LXXXIII
DB:15
Qur'an 5:2, 14:27; paraphrased in DB:15
DB:15

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This mutation of psychological structures corresponds to what the Baha’i
writings call “the age of
maturity” which is described by Shoghi Effendi in these terms:

“The Revelation of Baha’u’llah, whose supreme mission is none other but
the
achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations,
should, if we
be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signalizing through its advent
the coming
of age of the entire human race. It should be viewed not merely as yet another
spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a
further stage in a
chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a
series of
recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in
the
stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet.”441

Shoghi Effendi continues in giving as the signs of this maturity:

“The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship,
the
founding of a world civilization and culture—all of which must synchronize
with the
initial stages in the unfoldment of the Golden Age of the Baha’i Era—should
by their very
nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the
furthermost limits in
the organzation of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must
indeed as
a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and
develop.”442

Then he adds:

“That mystic, all-pervasive, yet indefinable change, which we associate with
the stage of
maturity inevitable in the life of the individual and the development of the

fruit must, if
we would correctly apprehend the utterances of Baha'u'llah, have its
counterpart in the
evolution of the organization of human society. A similar stage must sooner or
later be
attained in the collective life of mankind, producing an even more striking
phenomenon
in world relations, and endowing the whole human race with such potentialities
of well-
being as shall provide, throughout the succeeding ages, the chief incentive
required for
the eventual fulfillment of its high destiny."443

The evolution of humanity as a social entity obviously depends upon the
evolution of individuals.
Thus the advent of a spiritual civilization is not possible without a
spiritualization of human beings.
This spiritualization is the purpose of Revelation. Baha'u'llah writes in
Lawh-i-Muhammad Ibrahim
Khalil:

"It hath been decreed by Us that the Word of God and all the potentialities
thereof shall
be manifested unto men in strict conformity with such conditions as have been

WOB:163. We must understand this global community in the sense the concept was
given by the Stoics,
which is to say, a spiritual and universal brotherhood.
WOB:163. This global citizenship must depend upon the consciousness that "all
humanity" descends
"from the same stock" (Bahá'í Prayers, Wilmette, 1991, p. 101)
WOB:163-164

foreordained by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. We have, moreover,
ordained that its veil of concealment be none other except its own Self. Such
indeed is
Our Power to achieve Our Purpose. Should the Word be allowed to release
suddenly all
the energies latent within it, no man could sustain the weight of so mighty a
Revelation.
Nay, all that is in heaven and on earth would flee in consternation before it.

"Consider that which hath been sent down unto Muhammad, the Apostle of God.
The
measure of the Revelation of which He was the bearer had been clearly
foreordained by
Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Powerful. They that heard Him, however, could
apprehend His purpose only to the extent of their station and spiritual

capacity. He, in
like manner, uncovered the Face of Wisdom in proportion to their ability to sustain the
burden of His Message. No sooner had mankind attained the stage of maturity, than the
Word revealed to men's eyes the latent energies with which it had been endowed —
energies which manifested themselves in the plenitude of their glory when the Ancient
Beauty appeared, in the year sixty, in the person of `Alí-Muhammad, the Bab.”444

‘Abdu’l-Baha has discussed this question of the maturity of humankind in the following manner:

“All created things have their degree or stage of maturity. The period of maturity in the
life of a tree is the time of its fruit-bearing...The animal attains a stage of full growth and
completeness, and in the human kingdom man reaches his maturity when the light of his
intelligence attains its greatest power and development... Similarly there are periods and
stages in the collective life of humanity. At one time it was passing through its stage of
childhood, at another its period of youth, but now it has entered its long-predicted phase
of maturity, the evidences of which are everywhere apparent... That which was applicable
to human needs during the early history of the race can neither meet nor satisfy the
demands of this day, this period of newness and consummation. Humanity has emerged
from its former state of limitation and preliminary training. Man must now become
imbued with new virtues and powers, new moral standards, new capacities. New
bounties, perfect bestowals, are awaiting and already descending upon him. The gifts and
blessings of the period of youth, although timely and sufficient during the adolescence of
mankind, are now incapable of meeting the requirements of its maturity.”445

We must not however confuse however the potential collective maturity of humanity with the
maturity of each individual human being. If the 20th century was an age of monstrous horrors and
tribulations, it is precisely because the individual man has not yet arrived at the spiritual level of

development which is required by the potential collective maturity of humanity. It is only once the individual human being will be fulfilling his potential that this stage of maturity may become a concrete reality and that the new civilization announced by Baha'u'llah may blossom.

3. The process of individuation and the process of spiritualization

GL:XXXIII:76-77; partially cited WOB:164
WOB:164-165

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This leads us to a trait which is altogether distinctive to Baha'i spirituality—it addresses itself as much to the individual as to the masses. It even establishes a dialectical support between the development of the one and the development of the other. Through this dialectical support, the Baha'i Faith has invented a new way of defining the status of the spiritual seeker in society.

Louis Dumont, a leading French thinker on religion, has clearly indicated that in all societies that have existed until now, the man who wished to consecrate his life to the spiritual quest could not do so without totally renouncing the world and placing himself along the margins of society.446 This is the case, to different degrees, of the Hindu sanyasin, the Buddhist and Christian monk, the Muslim Sufi dervish.

The reason for this social marginalization is that the one who embarks upon the spiritual quest must first attain to interior freedom, which is to say he must become an autonomous individual. This requirement of attaining freedom and this entry into the process of individuation was, until the appearance of modern Western culture, in contradiction with the holistic foundations of all traditional societies. These societies certainly establish a link between the process of individuation and the process of spiritualization, but they wanted to remain in control of individuation, and so they codified its exercise, and above all they socially circumscribed the candidates deemed acceptable for spiritual emancipation by first defining the framework of their social role. The imposition of celibacy was often a mark of this social marginalization.

Furthermore, the churches and other places of worship, being institutions by definition, defended these holistic foundations of society, resulting in the numerous conflicts between the great mystics and their corresponding religious authorities.

In the West there was developed a unique phenomenon. The process of individuation was separated from the process of spiritualization, a separation which had both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, this separation permitted the emancipation of man and the winning of his psychological autonomy, an indispensable step in the process of the maturation of humanity. On the negative side, this process of individuation was accompanied by a corresponding movement resulting in the progressive desacralization and secularization of society. This movement has led humanity to its present immersion in materialism and to a narcissistic form of individualism which aims exclusively to satisfy the ego, the inferior self (nafs). On one side, humanity has seen the opening up of extraordinary perspectives for development. On the other, it has been incapable of mastering these perspectives, and thus has become engaged in a self-destructive process of social disintegration.

One of the purposes of Baha'u'llah is to reestablish equilibrium between the two processes of individuation and spiritualization. Humanity must become more spiritual, if man wishes to master the consequences of his own interior autonomy.

The process of individuation has permitted us to acquire qualities such as psychological autonomy, consciousness of self and identity, as well as moral self-determination and social independence. Thus the individual has become conscious of his need of expansion and of the fact that he is endowed with largely unexploited potentialities. According to Baha'u'llah, all these positive elements must be encompassed in a larger process, the process of spiritualization, which is the submission of the

Louis Dumont, "Le Renoncement dans les religions de l'Inde," in Homo Hierarchicus, appendix B. Also see Essais sur l'individualisme une perspective anthropologique sur l'ideologie moderne, p. 35

individual to divine transcendence. Whereas the modern individual proclaims that he is the source of his own values, Baha'u'llah teaches that the values of every human society are spiritual, because human nature is spiritual. Its values are consequently transcendental. The adjective "transcendental" here signifies that the laws of human nature are inscribed in the universe. They are part of the divine worlds! Man can only learn and live by these spiritual values in a relative and progressive manner. Human progress essentially consists in acquiring a better intelligence inclusive of these spiritual values.

Baha'i gnosis thus cannot be the lot of a small number of "true believers". There are certainly always elites who transform society, but in Baha'u'llah's conception, these elites are duty bound towards the entire human race to assist them to master their new liberty and to elevate their level of spirituality. Baha'u'llah does not address himself to a small number but to humanity in its entirety. His aim is not to transform a handful of disciples, but the entire human race. This imperative conditions numerous aspects of Baha'i theosophy.

We now see what meaning to give to those injunctions of Baha'u'llah which call upon us to abandon the ideas bequeathed to us by our forefathers, to renounce all human learning, and to become detached from all that we have seen, heard and understood. This is an effort to establish the conditions of true liberty and of the autonomy of the subject that are so indispensible to our spiritualization. This is the purpose and meaning of the "conditions of the true seeker" that we have studied in the preceding Chapter.

4. Meditation and spiritual hermeneutic

We have explained the personal character of ta'wil in the Baha'i Faith, the exercise of ta'wil being a fundamental element in the process of individuation and spiritualization. This ta'wil relies upon a daily practice of meditation on the sacred texts, which, along with daily prayer, is given by Baha'u'llah as one of the fundamental obligations of the believer. This

meditation is made the
specialized location of the active imagination and spiritual hermeneutic. But, as Jung showed, the
process of individuation is inseparable from a symbolic exploration of the world. The symbolic
expression of Revelation is intended to introduce a new equilibrium into the archetypal chaos of
man. This is why meditation upon symbolic language leads to what Baha'u'llah calls "the revelation
of the inner mysteries of God"447 and through this intermediary to mastery of the inferior self (nafs)
and knowledge of the divine Self. This is a process of interiorization and appropriation in the sense
that its purpose is to fuse the inner being with the divine Word so that it will be transformed by that
Word to such an extent that the inner being and the meaning of the Word are no longer two but
one. Such a process cannot be other than personal and its result can not have a normative
implication for other persons, even though it is always of the highest interest as an indicative
qualification. One of the errors of the West has been to reduce ta'wil entirely to its written form and
to see in this form the exceptional product of an uncommon mystical intelligence. In reality, ta'wil is
a function of the soul given to every human being who desires to undertake the spiritual quest.
Hence, no ta'wil is superior to any other.

Besides, written ta'wil always runs the risk of foundering in verbal delirium, of becoming a play of
KI:#213:192; GL:CXXV:264. Cf. G. Durand, L'imagination symbolique, 2nd edition, 1989, p. 68

words and syllables, logorrhe.

Ta'wil must go beyond the confines of language in order to permit a direct identification of the
individual consciousness with the symbol, and thereby to arrive, according to the famous expression
of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i, "at the secret which alone can teach the secret."

We must take care not to reduce Baha'i hermeneutic to an explanatory process. This hermeneutic
explains nothing. It is an interiorization of the divine Word, the purpose of which is synonymous
with the transformation of the self.

5. Reason and the re-enchantment of the world

Baha'i theosophy is willingly innovative. It is not tied down by the weight of old traditions and its avowed aim is to transform the world by giving us a new representation of all things. It aims at no less than a respiritualization of man and a resacralization of the world. It is this process that, in paraphrasing Max Weber, we call the "re-enchantment" of the world. All theosophy begins from the principle that the material world is a symbolic expression of the spiritual world. The material world is perceived as such through the mediation of the revealed Word of the Prophets. There is therefore a function of correspondence between this revealed Word and its symbolic language on the one hand and the symbols of nature on the other. It is by means of this path that the re-enchantment of the world can occur, which will lead us to recognize the world as a hierophany.

Furthermore, knowledge of the revealed Word need not conflict with or cancel out knowledge of nature. Nature is accessible to us by two paths, that of science and that of theosophy. Baha'u'llah proclaims strongly that there is no science without theosophy and no theosophy without science. It is one of the employments of the analogy of the two wings of a bird developed by 'Abdu'l-Baha. To fly, a bird needs two wings. In order to develop, humanity needs equilibrium between the wing of science and the wing of religion. If the wing of religion weakens we fall into the mire of materialism; if the wing of science weakens we fall into the swamp of superstition. Gnosis must be accompanied by science, for it is science which permits us to take the measure of the universe, to explore its complexity, to unveil its harmony, and thereby to appreciate the grandeur of the Creator of the worlds.

This leads us to affirm the necessity of an equilibrium between reason and the heart. To engage oneself in the spiritualization of the world does not mean to renounce reason. The progressive development of rationality is the motor of the process of individuation while the cultivation of mystical knowledge is at the heart of the process of spiritualization.

The vertical symbolic hierarchies must be reflected on the horizontal plan. The re-enchantment of
the world takes place through the resacralization of space, the erection of signs and of testimonies, of
monuments which are not simple “vestiges' such as monuments to the deceased, but rather the
translation of the celestial order onto the terrestrial plan. Nothing reflects this conception better than
the Baha’i holy places, and particularly the most holy among them, in Israel, located upon Mt.
Carmel, and in the vicinity of the tomb of Baha’u’llah at Bahji.448 The pilgrimages which take place

Translator’s Note: Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 306: “…twin holy Shrines, in the plain of ‘Akká

there are conceived of as initiatory voyages the guides of which are the monuments dispersed in the
gardens, themselves the representation of a spiritual world. The translation into horizontal language
of the vertical hierarchy of spiritual symbols has been nowhere explained better than in the
description by Shoghi Effendi of the nine concentric circles around the mortal remains of the Bab,
who was described by Baha’u’llah as “the point around which turn the reality of the Prophets and
Messengers”:449

“The outermost circle in this vast system, the visible counterpart of the pivotal position
conferred on the Herald of our Faith, is none other than the entire planet. Within the
heart of this planet lies the “Most Holy Land,” acclaimed by ‘Abdu’l-Baha as “the Nest of
the Prophets” and which must be regarded as the center of the world and the Qiblih of
the nations. Within this Most Holy Land rises the Mountain of God of immemorial sanctity, the Vineyard of the Lord, the Retreat of Elijah, Whose return the Bab Himself
symbolizes. Reposing on the breast of this holy mountain are the extensive properties
permanently dedicated to, and constituting the sacred precincts of, the Bab’s holy
Sepulcher. In the midst of these properties, recognized as the international endowments
of the Faith, is situated the most holy court, an enclosure comprising gardens and terraces

which at once embellish, and lend a peculiar charm to, these sacred precincts. Embosomed in these lovely and verdant surroundings stands in all its exquisite beauty the mausoleum of the Bab, the shell designed to preserve and adorn the original structure raised by ‘Abdu’l-Baha as the tomb of the Martyr-Herald of our Faith. Within this shell is enshrined that Pearl of Great Price, the holy of holies, those chambers which constitute the tomb itself, and which were constructed by ‘Abdu’l-Baha. Within the heart of this holy of holies is the tabernacle, the vault wherein reposes the most holy casket. Within this vault rests the alabaster sarcophagus in which is deposited that inestimable jewel, the Bab’s holy dust. So precious is this dust that the very earth surrounding the edifice enshrining this dust has been extolled by the Center of Baha’u’llah’s Covenant, in one of His Tablets in which He named the five doors belonging to the six chambers which He originally erected after five of the believers associated with the construction of the Shrine, as being endowed with such potency as to have inspired Him in bestowing these names, whilst the tomb itself housing this dust He acclaimed as the spot round which the Concourse on high circle in adoration.”450

6. The divine worlds and the angelic hierarchies

Some have been disquieted when they discovered that all reference to the angelic hierarchies so popular in Shi'i writings is absent from the writings of Baha’u’llah. In such references they see not only the concretization of the hierarchical structure of the world, but they regard the angels as the incarnations of the hermeneutic function and consider the angelic hierarchies as a necessary safeguard against the destruction of theosophy by Western rationality. Gilbert Durand writes:
“These angels, which we find in other Oriental traditions are good…the very criterion of a symbolic

and on the slopes of Mt. Carmel…”
Shoghi Effendi, The Citadel of Faith, pp. 95-96.
Ruhiyyih Rabbani, The Priceless Pearl, pp. 246-247.

ontology. They are symbols of the symbolic function itself which is—like them!—the
mediator between the transcendence of the signified and the world manifested in concrete,
incarnate signs, which signs thereby become symbols for it."451

To tie the destiny of theosophy to an angelology derives from a deformation of perspective resulting
from the immense influence of Avicenna (Ibn Sina), be it in Latin or Arabic, and more widely of the
systems of Neoplatonic thought that appropriated the hierarchy, linked to a concept of process to
which we will return, to frame a system in explanation of the world. In the next several Chapters of
this book, we will examine the relations between the thought of Baha'u'llah and Neoplatonism. This
will lead us to affirm that the important points of contact which are attested by both of these two
visions of the world derive from the fact that the one and the other are both philosophies of
emanation. Notwithstanding this, Baha'u'llah excludes any system of emanation by procession,
while offering us very original descriptions of the engenderment of being and the hierarchization of
the worlds. For the thought of Baha'u'llah aims at avoiding a fundamental stumbling-block of
Neoplatonism which consists in regarding matter and the sensible world as a sort of degeneration of
the spiritual and the intelligible, entailing a downfall of the spirit, and with it the downfall of man.
The problem, which we will treat subsequently in a more complete manner, consists in explaining
why God did not create a purely spiritual world, and why He imposed upon the human being this
sojourn of the spirit in matter, with the retinue of sufferings that accompany it. Christian
theologians, adopting the perspective of Augustine (Aurelius Augustinus), resolved this problem
through the dogma of original sin. Islamic theologians (mutakalimun) remained closer to the
Neoplatonism of Plotinus and of Proclus as most Muslim theologians imagined that the procession
of the Spirit, bringing about the engenderment of successive hypostases, led to a weakening of the
original emanation resulting in its imprisonment in matter. Baha'u'llah, by eliminating all reference
to the fall, and in showing that matter is one of the ways in which the Spirit

evolves and a means
that the Spirit employs in order to effect its expansion and diversification, considerably modifies the
meaning of the traditional hierarchies in the universe and thus renders the problem of the
angelologies secondary. However to understand the significance of the concept of hierarchy in the
metaphysic of Baha'u'llah, we must further clarify the role of the angelic hierarchies in the
Avicennian systems.

Antoine Faivre expresses the same fears as Gilbert Durand regarding the disappearance of the
angelic hierarchies, and is more precise regarding the functions attributed to these hierarchies. In
the 14th century in the West the great disturbance of Western theosophy took place under the
increasing influence of nominalism and of Latinized Averroism. For Faivre, the primary
consequence of the introduction of Averroism, namely the disappearance of these angelic
hierarchies had as its secondary effect of bringing about the disappearance of spiritual hermeneutic,
the foundation of the theosophical complementarity of the exoteric and the esoteric.452 He writes
notably that the cosmology of Ibn Rushd "ends in destroying a part of the Avicennian angelology,
that of the intermediary worlds which represent the "angeli" or "Animae coelestis", the domain of
Malakut, of the World of autonomous Images perceived in themselves by the active imagination. In
posing a fundamental homology between "Anima coelestis" and "Anima humana", Avicennism taught
the existence of an instrumental Intelligence, "dator formarum" ramified in a plurality of possible

G. Durand, L'imagination symbolique, p. 29
A. Faivre, Acces de l'esoterisme occidental, pp. 114-116

intellects. This also indicates, as traditional esotericism teaches, that our intellect is related to a
supra-individual source of light and of knowledge."453

Here we are encountering a fear that the disappearance of these hierarchies brings about the
disappearance of ta'wil, and thus provokes a rupture between the esoteric and the exoteric. There is

close link between the destiny of ta'wil and that of esotericism in the philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna). He also points out that the “animae coelestis” possess active imagination in a pure and perfect state, and that man is also capable of exercising this faculty, no matter how imperfectly, because of the relationship he can have with these angelic or intellective hierarchies. Their disappearance, in Averroes [Ibn Rushd] and in Averroism, is represented by the reducing of the Imaginal to the status of “simple imaginary.”454

This is squarely in the realm of Avicennism, and it is not difficult to see that the positions that are presented here were strongly influenced by Henri Corbin. He regarded the disappearance of Christian Platonism and of Latin Avicennism under the influence of Averroism and of Orthodox Scholasticism as a catastrophe for Western thought. Notwithstanding this, he had the lucidity to recognize that a synthesis between Christianity and Avicennism was to some degree impossible.455 In effect, because of the dogma of the Trinity, it was impossible in Christian theology to identify the instrumental Intelligence with the Holy Spirit, as was accomplished by Suhrawardi, and thereby to develop a true “prophetic philosophy”456. Corbin reminds us that this instrumental Intelligence is…

“…the tenth in the hierarchy of the Cherubim or pure Intelligence separated (Angeli intellectuales), and this hierarchy are doubled by the secondary hierarchy of the Angels, which are the motivating souls of the celestial spheres; at every degree of these hierarchies, in every habitation of the hierarchy of being, are formed between these ones and the others many couples or syzygies”.457

Corbin recalls the role of these soul-angels as the motor-force of the celestial spheres, then refers to their role as supports of the active Imagination:

“…they are even the Imagination in a pure state…They are to perfection the Angels of this intermediary world in which the prophetic inspirations and theophanic visions take place; their world is in itself the world of symbols and of symbolic knowings…As for

Intelligence or the Holy Spirit, it is from it that our souls emanate; it is at the same time
the existentiatrix and the illuminatrix. All knowledge and all reminiscence are an
illumination projected by it upon the soul. By it, the individual human is attached directly
to the celestial Pleroma, without needing the mediation of a magister or of an ecclesiastic
reality…”458

Ibid., p. 114
Ibid., p. 115
Henri Corbin, L'imagination creatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi, p. 16
The attempts of this kind by Abelard were a complete failure.
L'imagination creatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi, p. 17
Ibid.

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For Corbin, the mediation of the angelic hierarchies replaces all terrestrial mediations, and this is of
course opposed to Christian dogma, which sees in the ecclesiastical hierarchy the earthly reflection
of the celestial hierarchies, from whence comes this “fear of the angel” that is found in traditional
Scholasticism. The “fear of the angel” brings about the degeneration of spiritual symbolism into
simple allegory, and the reduction of hermeneutic to exegetical commentary. Beyond that, for
Corbin, only the existence of these hierarchies is capable of guaranteeing the spiritual autonomy of
the individual and making possible “the prophetic psychology upon which the spirit of symbolic
exegesis depends”459, resulting not in a simple philosophy of the spirit, but in “a theosophy of the
Holy Spirit”460. Averroes certainly did not reject the angelic hierarchies, but he stripped them of
their mediatory role, and in his Aristotelian critique of Neoplatonism he rejected the theory of
Emanation. This resulted in the materialization of human intelligence and the corporalization of the
soul.

The question that we must pose is whether we must so closely link the fate of metaphysics and
theosophy as a whole with Avicennism. We find here a question regarding the true relationship
between tradition and Revelation. The reader who will have followed us up to now will perfectly

understand why Baha'i philosophy is altogether detached from this debate between Avicennism and Averroism. It does not derive from the same metaphysical presuppositions and is affirmed more in the form of an ontology of the spirit, while remaining a philosophy of emanation.

We must nevertheless examine the preoccupations of such a system. If we were to make a detailed list of the functions that the angelic hierarchies are supposed to assume in the Avicennian system, we will find that we have no difficulty whatsoever in identifying these functions in the hierarchy of the divine worlds of Baha'u'llah. This hierarchy of the divine worlds is thus clearly substituted for the angelic hierarchies of the Islamo-Platonic systems such as we find in Ibn Sina, Ibn al-'Arabi, al-Suhrawardi, the Ishraqiyyun and the School of Isfahan. It assumes the same hermeneutic, theosophical and metaphysical functions. This is a theme that we will develop further.

The translation of the angelic hierarchies into a hierarchy representing ontological modes is not without philosophical consequences and these merit exploration. First we must ask about the meaning of the resurgence of Avicennism in contemporary Western philosophical thought, a resurgence which is altogether curious after so many centuries of dormancy, and which is perhaps not a stranger to the influence of Heidegger and to his attempt to give to ontology a predominant role in philosophy. This resurgence unquestionably translates a new thirst for spirituality, and a desire to reconnect with sources and ancient tradition. Secondly, we may ask if this modern Avicennism is not disloyal to historical Avicennism. We may even suspect that certain of its contemporary defenders are making their mark by developing a philosophy of immanence foreign both to the spirit of Christianity and to that of Islam. For to reduce the Holy Spirit to the instrumental Intellect, is in a certain fashion to cut its connection to God and to render it an element among many others, quasi-autonomous in a celestial mechanism that obeys a law of necessity. This concept is very different from the transcendence affirmed by all the great religions and emphatically

by Baha’u’llah as well. This tendency is however coherent with the whole spiritualist movement of
our epoch which adheres to a philosophy of immanence in which the idea of God is emptied of its

L'imagination creatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi, pp. 17-18
Ibid., pp. 17-18

contents. This development responds to a profound need, which is that of affirming the autonomy of
the subject. We have noted this tendency in all of the authors cited. Corbin clearly affirms that the
existence of an instrumental Intelligence to which the soul of man can be related is a condition of his
liberty and assures his autonomy on the psychological plan— in establishing a metaphysic of
prophetic and imaginal liberty, and on the social plan in becoming free of any need for temporal
mediation or of an ecclesiastic magister. One can not affirm more clearly than this that spirituality
cannot be lived except on the individual plan, and that any search for spirituality which would take
the form of a collective movement, would lose it authenticity. Again, we must repeat that this
confuses the principle of individuation with the principle of spiritualization and substitutes the one
for the other. Baha’u’llah, taking up again the great concepts of Christian spirituality, affirms the
necessity that the celestial order be reflected in the terrestrial order. This does not mean that this
reflection is effected to such an extent that its movement must lead to a spiritual brigading.
Conscious of the problem, Baha’u’llah has removed all of the ecclesiastical hierarchies, the
priesthood and other human intermediaries, from the spiritual path. But this does not mean that he
leaves their role empty. He has founded his magister upon the notion of “covenant” or “alliance”,
representing first and foremost the relation of fidelity and intimate adhesion that each believer must
establish with the divine Manifestation. He has wished that this relation of fidelity and of intimate
adhesion be broadened to include the depositories of this covenant (mithaq) and of this alliance ('ahd),
which are the Institutions that his writings have engendered. At the crowning apex is the Universal

House of Justice, the guardian of his writings, the supreme legislature, the primary purpose of which
is to translate the spiritual values and divine laws articulated by Baha'u'llah into norms that enable
the celestial order to be clearly reflected in the terrestrial order. He put in place an Institution which
resembles not the Roman Pontificate, nor the Imamat, nor the caliphate, and from which emanates
a permanent authority, that will shelter his community of faith from schisms and divisions, the like of
which have so torn up the religions of the past.

The third danger which the modern neo-Avicennism represents, after the loss of transcendence and
the reduction of the process of spiritualization to a process of individuation, seems to us to come
from confusing theosophical illumination with prophetic inspiration. The illumination of the soul
which results from gnosis has nothing to do with prophetic revelation because prophetic revelation
can not be made an expression of the Imaginal World. If theosophical illumination is carried out in
the world of Malakut, prophetic inspiration comes from Jabarut, from the world of Revelation and of
Command ('alam-i-amr). The one and the other cannot ever be on the same existential level. Man
will always remain in submission to the law of God. It will always be impossible for him to become
the equal of the Prophet. The product of his active Imagination only has value if his spirit is
detached and purified from vain imaginations, and if his interior being is transformed through the
influence of the divine Word. The active Imagination must always remain in submission to the
control of the divine Word. It is thus clear that man and the Prophet are different both in nature
and in status.

This process should not however be regarded as inherently opposed to Avicennism. On the contrary
we can demonstrate that more than one of the its objectives is at the heart of the concerns and
objectives of Baha'u'llah. Avicennism had, as one of its ambitions, the affirmation of the autonomy
of the subject in the context of a spiritual movement. We have demonstrated how this objective was
attained in the teaching of Baha'u'llah. All the functions of the Avicennian angelology are preserved

in the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah, commencing with the symbolic function.

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7. New aspect of the cosmo-anthropic principle

It is clear that the function of the divine worlds such as are described in the "Tablet of Wisdom" (lawh-i-hikmat), is above all hermeneutic. This hermeneutic function tied to gnosis leads to the unveiling of spiritual realities. However, there is no need for an "instrumental Intelligence" which would explain how man can, in his own soul, have knowledge of these realities. This is because the nature of man is divine, and he himself is the reflection of the highest Names of God, and thereby he can grasp the structure of the spiritual and sensible worlds. We here arrive at a new aspect of the cosmo-anthropic principle. If the Spirit is at the origin of creation and if man is one of the highest manifestations of this Spirit, then it is natural that we find a unity of structure between man and the world. But this circularity is not explained except by means of a third element, which is the Creator.
Man is the mirror of God and the world is the mirror of man. Another aspect of the anthropic character of Baha'i gnosis resides in the conviction that we cannot know God independently of His creation and therefore independently of our own selves. Even as man is created in the image of God, God is likewise in the image of man. We cannot think of God independently of the fact that He is the Creator of the universe in which we live.

From this point of view, all knowledge contains an important part of the anthropic principle. There is no need to refer here to an "instrumental Intelligence" to explain the human perception of spiritual realities. This intermediation of the "instrumental Intelligence" between the intellect of man and the spiritual realities is replaced by the imaginal function of Malakut. However, distinct from Ishraqi concepts of this Imaginal World, Baha'u'llah depicts no absolute separation between the knowledge of sensible realities and the knowledge of spiritual realities. The unity of the creaturely world (pleroma) establishes the unity of knowledge. It is thus that Baha'u'llah's thought avoids a contradiction between science and religion. Even as there exists in gnosis an

anthropic principle
which assures that the Imago Dei deposited in man permits him to know his Creator, so also modern
physics has shown that the closing of a quantum phenomenon is assured by the observer, which
implies that the quantum phenomenon is itself structured as the function of a law of intelligibility
which it shares with the human spirit. The transposition of the anthropic principle from the domain
of cosmogenesis to the domain of quantum mechanics shows that the heuristic methods of science
are not so far from the gnoseologic and noetic methods of religion.

8. Pleroma and holistic knowledge

It is precisely this kind of movement which makes Baha'i thought a theosophy. This theosophy has
however no pretensions to substitute for science. Its role is only to establish unity between the
knowledge resultant from the mystical experience, from metaphysics and science. Each of these
three domains must remain autonomous. The affirmation of their complementarity in Baha'i
thought has been lengthily developed by 'Abdu'l-Baha in multiple venues. He affirms in particular
the complementarity of tradition, reason and intuition. In no case should science step on religion or
religion on science. It is nonetheless necessary to furnish a philosophical endeavor in a sustained
manner in order to harmonize the results of the two. It is because of not having furnished this work
that the ancient theologies have disappeared, or that they have been marginalized, having lost all
power to explain the global reality of the world.

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The unity of the creaturely world ('alam al-khalq) establishes what we could call the Pleroma461, which
is to say a cosmic vision based upon the inseparability of the sensible and the intelligible, the physical
and the spiritual, the empirical and the imaginal. Isolated spiritual gnosis is thus without value as
much as it does not result in a knowledge of man, of psychology, of social mechanisms and physical
reality. It is for this reason that Baha'u'llah affirms that the best way to transform oneself is to
become a "servant of humanity" and to join one's forces to all those who have already accepted his

“Covenant” in order to accomplish the “Divine Plan” which aims at a radical transformation of society and the establishment of a new civilization. The holistic character of Baha’i epistemology based on the Pleroma is perfectly coherent with the political and social ideas of Baha’u’llah. The interior transformation of man as an individual is inseparable from his efforts to transform social reality.

9. The Pleroma and the active imagination

At the same time, the holistic knowledge of the Pleroma explains how the great mystics, 'Attar and Rumi for example, could have had the intuition of the structure of the sensible world, and seemed to have clearly perceived the reality of the atom. The unity of the heuristic processes established by the unity of the Pleroma explains the complementarity of science and religion. The unveiling of this unity is not possible except through the “imaginal” faculty of man, that which gives him access to spiritual realities, and which we prefer to call the “active imagination” rather than the “creative imagination” as was proposed by Henri Corbin.462

The “creative imagination” of Islamic philosophy is totally disconnected from reason, which is not at all the case with the “active imagination” of Baha’u’llah. From this perspective, it is this “active imagination” that attempts in science to grasp the empirical reality of the universe and which, through faith and mysticism, attempts to grasp spiritual realities. This holistic approach pays close attention to the often intuitive character of scientific discovery as has been demonstrated by Feyerabend.463

10. Heuristic consequences of the transparent theology of the divine Names

The unity of the creaturely world as Pleroma and the unity of the heuristic processes together assure

We are borrowing the expression from Theillard de Chardin, who himself borrowed it from the early gnostic Christians. The Greek word “pleroma” associates the ideas of totality and perfection.
We must warn the reader here that the term “active imagination” does not exist in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh and that we are using the concept of imagination here in

reference to the philosophical
tradition. This does not mean that we do not find in the Bahá'í writings a theory of the imagination and of
the imagined. That which the philosophers call "imagination", that is, the capacity to represent intelligible
realities, is called by Bahá'u'lláh "reason" ('aql). Reason is what permits us to go beyond phenomena and to
discover the hidden laws of the universe. Of course, we must not confuse this "imagination" which describes
the intellective and heuristic power of the soul endowed with reason with the "vain imaginations" (awham,
zunun) about which Bahá'u'lláh speaks in certain places.
P. Feyerabend, Contre la methode: Esquisse du'une theorie anarchique de la connaissance, Paris, 1979. Sometimes the
ideas of Feyerabend have a provocative aspect that one must be aware of in order to appreciate them fully.

the unity of empirical and spiritual knowledge, without having recourse to a supra-individual
mediating source of knowledge. This unity of knowledge is based upon the transparent character of
the creaturely world as the reflection of the divine Names.

Moreover, we must draw attention to a fundamental aspect of this transparent theology. It is not the
divine Essence that is reflected in creation, but rather the divine Names. Thus man can never arrive
at the knowledge of the Essence of God, but only relative knowledge of His countless Names and
Attributes. This explains why the world is only partially intelligible. To arrive at the absolute
knowledge of the Names and Attributes of God in their fundamental unity would be to know the
divine Essence. These Names and Attributes as we know them have an intellectual existence,
dependent upon the human spirit. They are structured according to an anthropic principle.

In order to more clearly appreciate the heuristic consequences of this transparent theology, we must
further elaborate the Baha'i conception of the divine Names as the manifestation of the Attributes of
God. In appearance, Baha'u'llah takes up the usual vocabulary of Islamic theology which
distinguishes between the Essence and Attributes of God. We will later see regarding the
"Commentary on the Hidden Treasure" of 'Abdu'l-Baha, that this

traditional distinction is not established as a reality in itself. The distinction between the Essence and Attributes of God is purely conceptual. We must take care that we do not become confused with the terminology. We do not speak of the Essence of God like the essence of any thing created by Him. The essence of things (jawhar) represents a suprasensible dimension of an independent reality. It is not in this sense that we can speak of the Essence of God. The divine Essence (dhat) has no sensible dimension, nor any suprasensible dimension. The only thing we can say is that it exists, but we cannot attribute "Being" to Him because this would already define Him according to a precise ontological category. The "Being" of God is a "nature" (kaynuna) which teaches us nothing about Him. There is thus a radical difference in ontological modality between what we call the divine Essence and the divine Attributes. The Attributes or divine Names are not understandable except through their effects which we observe in creation, for it is from the contemplation of these effects that we infer the existence of something more fundamental, which we call the divine Essence. The term dhat makes no reference to Platonic or Aristotelian conceptions of the essence as esse. The word derives from the Arabic dhu, meaning "who possesses". This word, it should be noted, is not a substantive but a preposition, a sort of word tool, which serves to construct composed expressions. The word dhat could characterize a pure existence, capable of receiving all predications. The divine dhat is "the In-self" of God. It would be better to translate it as such so as to avoid all confusion with precise ontological notions. We can thus inquire about the pertinence of a distinction between essence and attribute, in which one of the terms is totally unknown. In fact, only the Names of God exist for us, and they have a reality which is not independent of man.

11. The transcendence of the discursive and the intuitive

We thus affirm that the theory of knowledge based on the unity of the Pleroma, such as we see it deriving from the Baha'i cosmic vision, effectively removes the difficulties concerning our study of the theosophical character of Baha'i thought.464 Does this mean that all of

the philosophical

In speaking of a “Bahá’í cosmic vision”, we take care here not to attribute to Bahá’u’lláh what is uniquely the result of our comprehension of his writings.

problems which derive from a theosophy are here resolved?

Antoine Faivre attributes the decline of theosophy in the West not only to the influence of Averroism and thus Aristotelianism, but also to nominalism. It may be rash to suggest this radical of an epistemological break in the 14th century, because the development of Averroism and of nominalism proceeded from a rationalism which had much earlier antecedents in medieval thought.
The confrontation between two visions of the world, the one descending from Plato, the other from Aristotle, seems to be characteristic of Western thought, perhaps going back even further than Plato and Aristotle, to the pre-Socratics. The fact that it so extraordinary in the thought of Baha’u’llah, is that it entirely escapes these oppositions, and it seems to have found a way whereby, without foundering in Averroism, one nevertheless finds no trace of Avicennism. This radical rejection of Avicennism, which is carried out in the framework of a philosophy of emanation, leads to a just as radical a rejection of Aristotelianism. It seems possible then to define, based on the writings of Baha’u’llah, a new philosophical path which rises above all of the traditional oppositions, on the one hand, between discursive philosophy of the Aristotelian type and intuitive philosophy of the Platonic type; and on the other hand, between nominalism and realism, and between the positions which were defined by Augustinianism, Scotism and Ockamism.

In Western thought, this confrontation derives from a radical opposition between the rational and the irrational, and is indicated in an attempt to reduce the rational to the sensible and the irrational to the intelligible. In Baha’i thought, these categories are not superimposable. We can not reduce the irrational to an absence of rationality. The irrational is the domain of the spiritual par excellence. It is in this that the Baha’i concept of “spiritual” is clearly

distinguished from the classical concept of
“intelligible”. The West has never known how to rise above the antinomy which results from a
discursive approach and an intuitive approach to the world in concurrence. Finally, it is the
discursive approach which has carried the West away and it is probably that it is to this “victory”
that we owe the development of modern science and technology, but also, the disenchantment of
the world. In the East, it is the intuitive approach which has predominated. This has resulted in an
expansion of mysticism and a decline in the physical and practical sciences. But until the present the
great moments of civilization have always taken place when a tension existed between these two
approaches, which actually complement one another.

From a Baha’i point of view, the discursive approach and the intuitive approach are both of them
insufficient. On the one hand, Platonism has discerned in an abstract manner the fundamental
principle of the cosmos from which it derives secondary principles from the intelligible, to thus
descend again to the sensible world. Aristotle starts from the sensible world attempting to define the
principles of the intelligible world based on which we can inductively apprehend the nature of the
original principle. For Aristotle, the sensible world is the world of certitude while for Plato this is an
opaque world destined to change, upon which the physicists enunciate contradictory opinions
without ever arriving at any certitude. The progress of modern science has undoubtedly taught us
that the physical world could be a source of certitude. However, the certitudes that we obtain from
the sensible world are not pure certitudes. No certitude can be entirely founded upon reason. Our
reason permits us access to intelligible realities, which are the hidden realities of the universe, but it is
our faith which leads us to spiritual realities. Without the illumination of the soul which faith
engenders, never, teaches Baha’u’llah, will we be able to attain the knowledge of the ultimate reality
which is at the origin of the world.

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The unity of the Pleroma implies that we stop opposing the rational to the

irrational, the discursive to
the intuitive. The true knowledge of the world must be at the same time discursive and intuitive.
These two aspects must coexist in a dialectical process which works on itself and nourishes itself. We
must not be mistaken. It is not that we meant to arrive at a synthesis of the discursive and the
intuitive but rather a transcendence in a process which produces a unified and holistic knowledge
which would be something other than the simple addition of the one and the other.xxi

This implies that Baha'i theosophy would not be intuitive alone, but also discursive; which is to say
that the philosophy of nature which inspires it would have a scientific character.

At the philosophical level, this signifies that we can not think of the metaphysical without thinking of
the physical. The great ages of philosophical decadence are generally periods in which the most
complex metaphysical theories have been constructed. The philosophies of Proclus and of Mir
Damad Shirazi give us very good examples. Their metaphysical theories resemble very beautiful
cathedrals, but they are based on nothing, because they have lost all tie with empirical reality. These
are, as Baha'u'llah says, sciences "which begin with words and end with words."465 This expression
clearly indicates that for Baha'u'llah philosophy can not be a simple language game. Metaphysics
must be rooted in empirical reality. Its explanatory capacity should not be limited by an abstraction
produced by the human spirit, but must also impact the physical world as much as the spiritual
world. A metaphysic which disconnects from the physical is a metaphysic which explodes and loses
every self-regulating mechanism. Thus if Baha'i theosophy must have a discursive and scientific
aspect, it is also necessary that science stop ignoring the great metaphysical questions.

12. Excursion in Scholasticism

Inductive and rationalist thought has always been present in Western philosophy. The triumph of
nominalism and Averroism in the 14th century only represents the culmination of a long process that
began with the incapacity of Greek thought to conceive of the spiritual except

in the category of the intelligible. Thereafter, the definition of relations between faith and reason was one of the most important tasks of medieval philosophy. Intuitive philosophy did not predominate except between the Carolingian Renaissance to the end of the 10th century. From the 10th century onwards a strong dialectical movement already began to develop under the influence of Aristotelian treatises such as the “Organon”, the “Categories”, and the “Introduction” of Porphyry. Fulbert would give an important place to the study of Aristotelianism during this period. The application of dialectical methods to theology engendered insurmountable contradictions that the Christian world tried to resolve principally by forbidding the application of dialectic to questions of “faith”. The problem however is that what was defined as a question of “faith” by the Church had nothing to do with what Baha’u’llah calls “faith”, which proceeds from intuitive knowledge, accessible to every human being. For the Church, the question of “faith” refers to the articles of dogma that have already been defined. The result is that “faith” covers for the Church a good portion of what is philosophy for Baha’u’llah. The philosophers of the 11th century such as Enselme, or those of the 12th century including Abelard, tried to remove this contradiction by showing that what “faith”—that is, “dogma”— had defined can be demonstrated to be true by the use of dialectic. It is for this reason

Tajalliyat, third Tajalli, TB:52 and Lawh-i-Maqsud, TB:169

that nominalism appeared in this epoch with Roscelin.466 We must however refrain from making a scarecrow out of nominalism. Nominalism revealed real problems in the Scholasticism of this epoch such as—Upon what basis can we affirm the existence of universals? What is the value of the distinction between the essence and the accidents? What is the reality of the existence of the parts of a whole? It is interesting to find that these questions are at the very heart of Baha’i metaphysics and that they are resolved in a manner that is not that of Platonic Augustinianism, nor that of

nominalism, nor that of Avicennism. In fact, medieval philosophy could not resolve such problems
for lack of reflection upon the role of language.

CHAPTER TEN:
PHILOSOPHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF BAHA'I PSYCHOLOGY

1. Metaphysics and psychology

If we analyze certain of the difficulties which have come to light in the theosophical thinking of
the West, we will see that most of them derive from the fact that Christianity never succeeded in
assimilating the heritage of ancient Greek thought. From the encounter between Hellenism and
Christianity it was fated that incompatibilities would come into existence that were only partially
detected. Hellenism, even in its neo-platonist form was never able to attain to a complete
spirituality. In Greek thought we always find the traces of an original materialism. These
problems were transposed into Western theosophy, which explains its incapacity to resolve
certain problems, and particularly that of the spirituality of the soul. The solutions retained by
the West in order to establish this spirituality of the soul would result in the radical separation of
the soul from the body, masking the separation of the intelligible from the sensible. It can be
shown that from the Greek Fathers up until Descartes there is a perfect line of continuity. Their
incapacity to place sensation, in a satisfactory manner, in the soul would transport Western
psychology to the slope of materialism, which would result in the negation of the spirituality of
the spirit.

The psychology of Baha'u'llah avoids this peril because it is trichotomous. We describe as
trichotomous a psychology that distinguishes in the whole human not two entities (dichotomy)
such as the soul and the body, but three entities, that is to say, the soul, the spirit and the body.
We have seen in the preceding chapter how this trichotomy is established in the writings of
Baha'u'llah. It now remains to see the philosophical consequences thereof.

In founding his psychology upon trichotomy, Baha'u'llah is faithful to a long tradition. The

The excellent work of P. Alferi upon the philosophy of William of Ockham (“Guillaume d'Ockham le singulier”, Paris, 1989) has recently shown us the interest and originality of this conception. To think of the individual and of singularity is just as important as to think of the universal. Once more we must arrive at a synthesis of the two. This is precisely what was lacking in Scholasticism. William of Ockham is the first Western philosopher who asked about the limits of language to describe reality. Certain of his conclusions agree on this point with those of Bahá’u’lláh.

psychology of the Bible as well as that of the Qur'an is clearly trichotomous and we seen traces thereof even in St. Paul.467 It can thus seem astonishing that this doctrine was totally condemned by Western Christianity, and since the Council of Calcedonia. One must without doubt see in this a tragic misunderstanding whereby the Hellenized (Western) Church mistook trichotomy as conforming to the categories of Greek thought while the Churches of the East remained faithful to the trichotomous Judaic teaching.

2. Psychology of the Judaic Scriptures (TANAKH)

The TANAKH distinguishes three elements in the human composite: nefesh, neshamah and ruah. However, the same difficulties which exist in Arabic also exist in Hebrew for distinguishing these terms from each other. It does not seem that these distinctions are intrinsic to Semitic languages, or that their nature is purely linguistic, but it seems that they were imposed at a distant time in the past by means of a true psychological reflection. All these terms evoke the breath.

Nefesh represents in the TANAKH the vital spirit. It is common to man and to the animals. As a principle of life, nefesh is sometimes associated with blood. It dies with the body. Nevertheless, nefesh is not reducible to a simple biological principle. It embodies an important psychological aspect. Certain Scriptural verses make of it the seat of thoughts, of sentiments, of knowledge and science. It is sometimes judged negatively, as responsible for the passions, and sometimes

considered in its positive aspect, as a carrier of wisdom.

Ruah is like nefesh a breath, but it is a divine breath because it is the breath which God breathed into the nostrils of Adam in order to confer life upon him. Ruah distinguishes man from the animal. In Arabic, there are many other terms which designate the elements of the whole human. These terms are probably survivals from an epoch in which the psychical unity of man had not yet been perceived. Neshamah is hard to distinguish from nefesh and from ruah, with which it is interchangeable. It is also a vital breath principle of life. Levav signifies “heart”. It is the seat of the sentiments, good or bad, of thoughts and resolutions. Moreover, in the wisdom literature, these expressions seem to have been used above all for their metaphorical value.

The Christian translators translated nefesh with psyche in Greek and anima in Latin. Ruah was habitually rendered as pneuma in Greek and spiritus in Latin. As for Neshamah, it was generally translated by pnoe in Greek and spiraculum in Latin. Here we see the first difficulty, for pneuma is neither the equivalent of spiritus in Latin, nor of Ruah in Hebrew, and psyche is certainly not the equivalent of anima or of nefesh. The sliding of meaning is thus inevitable. These semantic slidings explain why we do not find in the Western languages a vocabulary adequate to describe the psychology of Baha’u’llah.

3. The soul according to the Fathers of the Church

In the Writings of the Greek Church Fathers, psyche was the word chosen to designate the soul of the deceased, as the eternal principle which survives this life. This gave rise to many exegetical

St. Paul: 1 Thessalonians V:23; 1 Corinthians II:14; 1 Corinthians XV:45; Hebrews IV:12.

and doctrinal contradictions, because this word was thought from the beginning to translate nefesh, which is a mortal principle. To this first difficulty was added the fact that the Greek Nous was introduced in a totally independent manner to designate a reality which is

not actually found
in the thought of either the Old and or the New Testament. This word, in the terminology of the
Fathers of the Church, designated the Spirit in general, but also the thought of man. It was
rendered into Latin sometimes as Sensus and sometimes as intellectus. The rare use of the word
Nous in the Septuagint served as the basis for a neo-platonic interpretation of the Bible by
affirming the equivalence of the Biblical Nous and the Plotinian Nous. This word, generally
rendered into English as “intellect” or “intelligence” and in Arabic by “'aql”, also designated
Reason, from which came a new source of misunderstandings.468

The earliest Fathers of the Church and the first Christian exegetes, who did not know Hebrew,
were thus faced with an anomalous vocabulary for which they had entirely lost the key. The
distinction, actually fairly fluid, between a principle of the bodily life (nefesh) and a principle of
spiritual life (ruah), completely escaped them, while it was evident to them that the thought of
man was identical to his soul (psyche) as was his soul identical with the principle of life. The
Greek Fathers saw a contradiction in the fact that nefesh could be the seat of a consciousness
independent of the psyche, the author of thought, and principle of spiritual operations.469

The Christian doctrine of the spirituality of the soul took three centuries to be established. It was
naturally to Plato and Aristotle that the Fathers turned as they sought to illuminate the Sacred
Scriptures while all the while being conscious that neither the one nor the other had a doctrine
compatible with Christianity.

To the semantic difficulties were added conceptual difficulties. The Greek Fathers, and following
them the Church of the West, would prove themselves incapable of thinking of the soul in any
other way than in the category of substance.470 They were thus obliged to distinguish between two
types of substances, the bodily substances and the spiritual substances. But in making soul a
substance, one runs the risk of making it corporeal. This is notably the case with Tertullian, who

stated that the soul is a body. This opinion was rejected by most of the Fathers, but they nevertheless considered that the soul had a reach, and that this reach coincided with the human body.

The Epistle to Diogenes affirms that “the soul permeates all the members of the body…”471
Irenaeus wrote that “the souls have the form of the body they receive, they adapt themselves as the water to the vase”472. Certain Fathers would find this image to be too fluid and would say that the relation of the soul to the body is that of frozen water in a pail.

The Fathers of the Church did not completely ignore the trichotomy of the human whole as it is

The Council of Calcedonia…
Proverbs IX:10; Proverbs XIC:2; Psalms LXXXV:4; Psalms CIII:1,35.
This is, it is well known, because of the Aristotelian influence which penetrated all of Greek thought and thereafter Christian thought.
Patrologie grecque, vol. II, col. 1176.
Ireneus, Adversus haeresis, II, C. XIX, n. 7.

found in the Judaic tradition. Many passages of Scripture are so manifestly trichotomic that one must accommodate them. Justin tried to resolve the problem in saying that the soul (psyche) is vivified by the spirit (pneuma). In fact, Justin wanted above all to demonstrate that the soul does not possess life in itself, that its immortality is not an immortality by nature, but an immortality conferred by God. Notwithstanding this, Justin everywhere links the unity and identity of the thinking principle with the soul.

Tatian proposed another solution. He distinguishes in the soul an inferior part and a superior part which constitute two distinct kinds of spirits. The spirit is thus a subdivision of the soul even as the inferior spirit is generally assimilated to the soul itself and the superior spirit is described as “the image and the likeness of God”473 which is added to the soul. The inferior soul is linked to matter, because for Tatian, the fundamental distinction is between matter and spirit. This brings him to conclude that the human soul is composed and not simple; the inferior

soul being
composed with the body. The soul serves as the link between the body and the image of God, but
the soul is in the body. We thus see the difficulty for Tatian to think of the soul independent of
the body and to arrive at explaining in a dichotomic manner that which is essentially trichotomic.

Irenaeus said that the spirit is a gift from God given to the soul and is that which makes man
perfect. He gives an ethereal body to the soul. It is this ethereal body which impenetrates the
physical body which is its form. He thus considers the soul as a fluid substance. Many Fathers of
the Church after him would have great difficulties in thinking of the soul, or of any other spiritual
creature, without a body, even if it be an ethereal body. The difficulty which is brought up by this
kind of interpretation is that if we make of the soul a corporeal reality, it becomes difficult for it to
retain its spiritual qualities. Hence, there was a great temptation in Christianity, as in Islam, to
corporealize the soul, as this permitted the explanation of the sufferings of hell. How could on
imagine that the fire of hell could have an effect upon the soul if it was not a body? Origen
attested that he was incapable of understanding how a spiritual substance could exist without a
body, and he gave bodies even to the angels.

4. First considerations on Origenism

It is nonetheless in Origen that we find the first systematic exposition of the trichotomic
psychology.474 Origen brings together all of the disparate elements which he finds in the
Scriptures and among his predecessors, and he attempts to combine them into a general theory.
He thus returns to Biblical trichotomy in a form which associates the spirit (pneuma) with the soul
[psyche] and the body (soma). Like Tatian, he nonetheless distinguishes an inferior from a superior
part in the soul. The superior element is the Nous which we could render equally as “Spirit” and
as “Intelligence”, but which some have assimilated to the Stoic hegemonikon in order to render it in
Latin by principia cordis, mentis or animae.

The inferior element of the soul was added to man at the moment of the fall. It

represents the
Genesis I:26-27.
Henri Crouzel, Origene, Paris-Namur, 1984, pp. 123-137, and, by the same author, L'anthropologie
d'Origene dans la perspective du combat spirituel," in Revue d'Ascetique et de Mystique, 31, 1955, pp. 364,
385. See also J. Dupuis, L'Esprit de l'homme: Etude sur l'anthropologie religiouse d'Origene, Bruges 1967.

temptation of the soul to turn away from the spirit in order to be of service only to the body.

The soul thus has the possibility of turning either towards the spirit or towards the body, in this
sense towards the seat of free choice and human personality. If it gives itself over to the spirit, the
soul spiritualizes itself and liberates itself from the confinement of the inferior element. On the
contrary, if it turn towards the body it becomes carnal. In practicing the Christian virtues, the
soul elevates itself in increasingly higher degrees of spirituality, bringing it closer and closer to the
image of God which it holds within itself.

The spirit (pneuma) is the divine element in man. It is thus the breath of God. It is this element
which possesses understanding of spiritual things, and it is thus this which, knowing the spiritual
order of things, can dictate to the soul its conduct. It is this element which receives divine grace
and in particular the gifts of the Holy Spirit and which permits man to participate in the divine.
When the soul is reduced to the carnal, it does not disappear but it enters into torpor and loses its
hegemonic power. It is this hegemonic faculty which Origen also calls "heart".

The psychology of Origen contains striking similarities to that of Baha'u'llah. These similarities
are explained in part, but only in part, by the fidelity of Origen to Judaic tradition. It would be
interesting to devote a comparative study to the two systems which would not only focus on the
problem of sources but would study the responses derived from those sources to problems of the
spirituality of the soul. For if Origen has the merit of leaving behind the ambiguity of his

predecessors, he is far from being able to resolve all the problems he addresses.

We can see for example that pneuma and psyche in the writings of Origen do not correspond exactly with nafs in the Writings of Baha'u'llah. For Origen pneuma is the divine element of man; in this sense it is close to the ruh of Baha'u'llah and it is a prolongation of the Biblical ruah. But the pneuma of Origen does not possess a clearly defined ontological existence. Furthermore, we do not understand the connection it has with Nous or with the hegemonic element which preexisted before the appearance of the soul in the body. The psyche of Origen remains the eternal principle in man at the same time that it is the support of physical life. Origen has considerable difficulty in preserving the unity of this psychical life which is apportioned between the spirit and the soul. To the degree to which the ethereal body is a reproduction of the physical body, the soul explains sensations, from whence there is a difficulty in explaining the difference between sense perception and spiritual perception. Origen resolves this problem in part through his theory of the five spiritual senses.475 Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, the concepts of Origen open magnificent perspectives for the development of a gnosis which, in itself, presents many resemblances with that of Baha'u'llah. Without this anthropology, Origen probably could not have established his theory of mystical exegesis which, in all of Christianity, is that which presents the most similarity to Muslim ta'wil.

The conceptions of Origen had only a subterranean influence in Christianity because they were condemned by the Church. It is certain that Origen did not know how to regulate the relationship between faith and reason and that he rejected all control of the discursive over the intuitive. His exegesis sometimes takes extraordinary liberties with the language of Scripture. However, without doubt, Origen was the greatest Christian thinker before Augustine. The

K. Rahner, Le debut d'une doctrine des cinq sens spirituels chez Origene.

Church, while all the while utilizing him, nevertheless denied him all recognition. Without doubt he aroused the “fear of the Angel”, and his condemnation by the Church is already a condemnation of all theosophical thought.

5. The doctrine of the Syrians

Trichotomic conceptions do not however disappear with the condemnation of Origen and his Alexandrians. They were conserved in the Syrian Church, which doubtless played an important role in the spiritual history of the East, but which is today totally ignored. The Syrians, because of their utilization of a Semitic language, were able to retain a terminology close to that of the Bible, all the while evolving its contents in a manner which prefigured the reflections of the great Muslim theologians. The Hebrew nefesh is rendered by the Syriac nafsha which leads to the Arabic nafs. This is a breath which is at the same time a vital principle. The Hebrew neshamah is rendered by the word neshma which may have simply been borrowed. As for the Biblical ruah, it becomes ruh. In opposition to the Greeks, the Syrians have always understood the immaterial character (la hulanayta) of the soul.476

Aphraate, for example, is clearly trichotomic.477 The terminology of Aphraate shows the same fluctuations that we will later encounter in Arabic. Ruh and Nafsha are for him easily interchangeable. Aphraate was not interested in this type of metaphysical question478. In general, the Syrians remained faithful to the teaching of the Judaic schools, particularly those of Babylonia and Nineva. This fidelity does not signify however that they ignored the Greek teaching, but that they arrived at a much happier synthesis than that achieved by the Hellenized Church Fathers of the West.

Aphraate assimilates the soul, in the sense of the psyche, to “the spiritual soul” (ruha nafshanayta)479 as principle of the immortal life. The third element is defined as a grace. But his difference from Justin or Tertullian is that he gives to the spirit a true ontological existence, because at death the spirit ascends into heaven, while the soul is “buried in its nature”,

“all sense is removed from
it”480, and it is plunged into sleep in expectation of the resurrection481. Those who have lived a
pious life sleep a peaceful slumber while the slumber of the wicked ones is populated by
nightmares, for they know that they are condemned. At the moment of resurrection, the spirit
comes down from the heaven to the body to resuscitate it along with the entombed soul. The
reunion of the spirit and the body leads then to the entire spiritualization of the soul.

We recognize in the adjective la-hulanayta, the Greek word hyle (matter) which shows to what point the
Syrians were penetrated by Greek thought. Hyle would become in Arabic hayula.
Aphraate, Les Exposes, VI, 14.
For complementary information on Aphraate, the [reader] may refer to the note which we have
consecrated to him at the opening of chapter IV.
The combination of the two terms shows the imprecision of the vocabulary and to what extent it is
difficult to distinguish in the texts ruh and nafsha.
Les Exposes, VI, 14.
Ibid., VIII, 18; and XXII, 6.

As for the sinners, they will only be revived by their souls and will thus live enshrouded in their
inferior nature. This doctrine contains striking resemblances with those which were later
developed in Islam. At the same time, we see that the principal difficulty which is opposed to the
construction of an operational psychology that could take up the problems of conscience and the
relations between thought and the body upon a trichotomic base, was that these theories had to
be compatible with the dogma of the physical resurrection. In the teaching of Baha’u’llah, the
question of the resurrection having been surmounted, nothing was opposed to the constitution of
a true trichotomic psychology in agreement with modern psychology and epistemology.

6. The spirit and the breath

The psychology of Ephraim is quite similar to that of Aphraate, although less subtle. He defines it
in a celebrated formula “the soul prevails over the body; the spirit

(re'yana) is more than the soul.
The soul adorns the body and the spirit gives its beauty to the soul."482

The Syriac term re'yana was used to render either the Greek Nous or the [Greek] word pneuma.
The term passed into Arabic under the form of rayhan, by assimilation to the root of Ruh (RWH
or RYH). It is interesting to note that we also find this term in the writings of Baha'u'llah and in
those of 'Abdu'l-Baha, often in the form "ruh wa rayhan" which is sometimes translated by "the
spirit and the breezes". We must never lose sight of the analogy that the Semitic languages have
between "the spirit" and "the breath". Ruh wa rayhan thus designates something in the writings of
Baha'u'llah which seems to be a divine emanation, probably an effect of the divine Verb, which
penetrates this world order to revive the human spirits and to confer upon them a new spiritual
life. But when we translate rayhan by "breeze" or by "breath" we must nevertheless never forget
that this term has a kinship with the Greek Nous. This breath is a grace and a confirmation by the
Spirit.

7. The spirit of faith

The Greek author often wishes to assimilate the spirit to the superior part of the soul, and
denoted it as grace or charisma. To the degree to which a trichotomic psychology opens upon
the theory of divine intuition through the illumination of the soul, "grace" or "light", in other
words "breath" is required to produce this illumination. We can show that Augustine's theory
that divine knowledge may be acquired through the illumination of the soul has a hard time
functioning in a resolutely dichotomist framework, and that it would be much more at ease in a
trichotomic framework. In the Baha'i writings, the spirit of faith plays the same role. 'Abdu'l-Baha
explains that the spirit of faith (ruh-i-imani) is a grace or a divine emanation (the two terms are
mingled) which produces effusions (nafathat)483 of the Holy Spirit, and which, through a divine
power (qurat-i-ilahiyyih) confers eternal life upon the soul.484 Let us not become confused here

Ephraim, Paradis, sermon IX, t. III, p. 591

The Arabic nafatha signifies “exhale”, “expectorate”, “breath”.
Naftha pl. nafathat can be rendered by
“exhalation”, “breath”, “expectoration”, “saliva”,
“emission”, “effusion”.
Mufavadat, XXXVI:109; SAQ:XXXVI:165.

regarding the meaning of this eternal life. He does not mean to say, as Justin did, that the
immortality of the soul is not an immortality by nature but rather a grace conferred by God upon
the soul. For the Baha’is, the soul is eternal in essence, but there are degrees in eternity. There is
the eternity of the stone even as there is the eternity of the spirit and the two are not equivalent.
The souls which do not receive the eternal life (hayat-i-abadiyyih) continue to exist in the kingdom
of Abha, but at an attenuated level of consciousness that will impede them from entering into the
contemplation of the most elevated spiritual realities. The eternal life thus designates the state of
superior consciousness which implies a union or a communion with God and His Manifestation.
But this divine power (rahmani), emanating from this divine grace (ilahi), does not have effects only
in the other world. In this world it transforms the human being and makes of “the terrestrial
man” (insan-i-ardi) a “celestial man” (insan-i-samavi). In the language of Origen, we may say that it
makes the “pneumatic” man “hylic”. “It makes the impure to be pure, the silent eloquent; it
purifies and sanctifies those made captive by carnal desires; it makes the ignorant wise.”485

This doctrine of the spirit of faith as a grace is not without a relationship to Aphraate. But,
differing from Aphraate, ‘Abdu’l-Baha does not make the ontological status of the soul dependent
upon this grace. In Aphraate, it is the spirit which receives this grace, and that is its principal
function. In Baha’i psychology, it confers upon the immortal soul, to supplement its immortality,
an eternal character having an entirely spiritual meaning. Baha’i psychology permits us to
distinguish clearly between the grace which produces illumination, and the soul as mirror.

8. The tribulations of the soul from Plato to Origen

One of the difficulties which the Greeks had in understanding the true meaning of the trichotomic psychology derives from the fact that they could not prevent themselves from interpreting it in Platonic, that is to say Pythagorean terms. But there are traces in Plato of archaisms which result in a true impossibility of conceiving the unity of the soul. This impossibility was detected by most of the Fathers of the Church, which is why, even the most Platonist among them, always rejected Platonic psychology. Plato identifies the concupiscent soul (epithymia) upon which depends the satisfaction of vital needs. This concupiscent soul easily slumbers in the immoderate (Hybris), which is why it must without respite be brought to temperance. The second soul is the heart (thymos) which is the seat of the passions. It swings constantly between the choleric (orge) and the courageous (andreia). For this reason, this heart is also called the irascible soul. Both the concupiscent soul and the irascible soul are mortal. The only eternal one is the Spirit (Nous) which is the seat of thought and which permits man to elevate himself to the intelligible. As we see, this Platonic trichotomy has little in common with the Judaic, Syrian or Origenist trichotomy. It is moreover upon the basis of this radical and abusive assimilation that theologians have critiqued trichotomic psychology and that certain ones believed that they could distinguish Pythagorean influences in Origen.

The condemnation of Origen resulted in a certain distrust of the Fathers who preceded him, and notably towards Clement of Alexandria, notwithstanding his having remained much more measured in his exegesis. This distrust would prepare for the character of Latin Patristics, which, after Augustine, broke with Greek Patristics. Already with Gregory of Nyssa there begins the

Ibid.

establishment of the dichotomist doctrine which would become the orthodoxy of the Church.

Gregory is one of the first who saw in the soul the image of the Trinity, which shows that the

Trinitarian quarrels were not without effect even in this domain. The doctrine of Gregory of Nyssa is furthermore not without value, for the soul therein is much more spiritualized than in the doctrine of the first three centuries and its unity is better established. It is furthermore without doubt its intention to establish this unity and the unity of the thinking subject that favored the dichotomist doctrine from the start.

From Gregory of Nyssa to Augustine, Christian theology introduced numerous refinements in its doctrine, on the origin of the soul, on liberty and the fall, on the idea of that the body is the prison of the soul, etc. But these developments do not really interest us. The soul is now defined as immortal, immaterial, spiritual, simple and not composed. Scholasticism will do no more than take up these givens, especially from Augustine, in order to progressively intermingle them with Aristotelian elements. For Augustine, the fundamental problem was the transmission of the original sin to the soul. Augustine without doubt had a very negative influence upon the evolution of Christianity, because of his pessimistic vision of man which motivated him to formulate the dogma of original sin and the doctrine of predestination. He was nevertheless a fine psychologist and a philosopher of consequence. The triumph of his ideas over those of Pelagiusxxii nevertheless marks another defeat for the Christian spirit.

As we see, Christian psychology was unfortunately defined by dogmas which had nothing to do with psychology, such as the sufferings of hell, the resurrection, the Trinity and original sin. Psychology was always treated as a secondary and inferior problem. This was an error which produced numerous inconsistencies. These are the same reasons which will result, in the 13th century, in the rejection of Augustinianism for Aristotelianism.

9. New tribulations from Thomas Aquinas to Descartes

For Thomas Aquinas, only Aristotelian categories permitted one to think about the spirituality of the soul. The Fathers of the Church, under the influence of Greek materialism, considered the soul as a spiritual substance. Thomas, conscious of this inconsistency, thought

he could happily
resolve this problem in making the soul the Aristotelian form of the body.486 This doctrine,
thought Thomas, would permit a better treatment of the resurrection. If the resurrection of the
body is necessary, it is because it is only the union of the soul and the body which form a
complete being. There is thus in man only one complete substance which results in this union.
The soul must be regarded as an incomplete substance which does not find its completion except
in unity with the body. Nevertheless, the union of the soul and the body, in order to be operative,
must be substantial. This is why the soul and the body must each one possess the character of a
substance, that is to say, form for the one, and matter for the other. Thomas believed that in this
way he could avoid the snare of Augustinianism, which saw in the soul a substance altogether
separate from the body, as well as the danger of corporealizing the soul. He thus delimits the
scope of the soul and believes that this operation is sufficient to affirm its spirituality. He is also
preoccupied with affirming the contingent character of the soul. This is why he makes the soul a
metaphysical composition. The soul is composed of essence and attributes (Avicennian influence),
We could also say “substantial form”.

of act and power, of subject and accident (Aristotelian influence). This metaphysical composition
distinguishes the soul from God, for only God is without composition. He is the Being in Itself, in
Him one can not distinguish Being from Existence.

If we study the transition between Origen and Augustine, then that to Thomas Aquinas and to
Descartes, we can not fail to be struck by the logic of this evolution. Thomas refuses to make of
the soul a reality in itself independent of the body. Instead of corporealizing the soul in giving it a
subtle body, and in making an independent substance, he corporealizes the soul in subjugating it
to the body, in conserving its existence solely through its close relation to the body. In doing so,
he opens the way for Descartes who, believing himself to have advocated for the

reverse of this
system, wished to establish an absolute separation of soul from body, and to reduce the soul to
thought. Materialistic thinkers had fun showing that if the soul is thought and if thought is a
cerebral function, then the soul and the body form one and the same reality. Thomas and
Descartes saw the danger, but they did not know how to avoid it, because they were weighted
down with the constraints of Christian dogma, especially in eschatological matters, and because
they were the prisoners of a dichotomist thought.

Descartes sees himself in particular to be obliged to affirm the substantial character of the union
of the soul with the body, which appears to be in total contradiction with his theory. But to affirm
the contrary would have reduced man to a ens per accidens, an accidental being, which would have
opposed Christian dogma. Because of this fact, he affirmed that thought is really and
substantially united to the body: “mentem corpori realiter et substantialiter esse unitam, non per situm aut
dispositionem”.487 Descartes found himself obliged to define the soul and the body as two distinct
substances, posing then the problem of the union of these two substances, the one material, the
other spiritual. It is thus that he makes of the body an extension, the soul a thought, thought
being defined as that which has no extension. To distinguish extension from thought obviously
derives from the Thomist distinction between matter and form which, itself, derives from the
corporeal nature of the soul of the Fathers of the 3rd century, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian.
These saw the soul as among the contents of the body, a vital fluid itself composed of parts,
introducing a duality between the inferior and the superior.

For Thomas Aquinas, the union of the soul with the body was effected by the vegetative powers
which connect it with matter. Thus, the soul is defined as a substantial, simple principle without
accepting any composition other than metaphysical composition, unexpected, incorporeal,
intrinsically united to the body, in organic life and sensitive life, but possessing an existence and
an action in the intellective life.

Thomas conceived of knowledge as the product of human composition.488 The body participates
with the soul in the acquisition of knowledge. The senses are related to the soul inasmuch as the
soul serves as the vital principle of the body. For Descartes, only the soul thinks and it has no role
in the vital and elementary functions of the body. When Descartes adopted the theories of
Harvey on the movement of the heart, it was not for pure scientific interest, but also for
metaphysical reasons: he hopes thereby to demonstrate that the heart pumps the warmth of the

487Translator's Note: Descartes' letter to Regius, later January 1642, CSMK, p. 206, AT III, p. 493.
Thomas Aquinas, Somme theologique, I, 75.2.

air and that thus the warmth of the body has nothing to do with the soul as a vital principle.489

On the one hand, we see the poverty of the notion of the spiritual of the soul in the Thomist
view, its absence of autonomy, the confusion between the intelligible and the intellectual, because
in renouncing the Augustinian theory of knowledge, he abolishes all power of direct intellection
by the soul, and thus all imaginative faculty. On the other hand, Descartes with his theory of
innate ideas and clear and distinct ideas returns to a more Augustinian conception of knowing.
However, in establishing a rigorous separation between the soul and the body and in reducing
the soul to thought, he ended up with a system in which it becomes impossible to explain the
relations between the soul and the body and in which the separation between thought and
sensation result in absurdities such as the animal-machines. Thus Descartes opened the way to
the immanentist philosophy of Spinoza and the idealism of Kant. From them derives the destiny
of all modern Western philosophy. The Patristics and Scholastics, never came out of the traps
which were tendered to them by Greek materialism; from which it results that Western
philosophy is afflicted with a veritable blindness towards the spiritual fact.

10. The spirituality of the soul

All of this brings us to a first testimony: which is that the spirituality of the soul does not have the same meaning in Western philosophy as in Baha'i thought. In Western philosophy, "spiritual" means "having the qualities of the spirit", but "spirit" is a category which is defined negatively in relation to matter in the framework of a bipolarity which is in fact a disguised dualism.
"Spiritual" thus essentially means immaterial, incorporeal, stripped of extension. Of a certainty, essences are spiritual, in this sense, but also the thought of man is spiritual. This leads rapidly to an intellectualization of the spirit; and finally the term can not serve other than to describe the interior and affective life of man.

In his "Dissertation on the spirituality of the soul", the Cardinal of Lucerne explains that among the proofs of the spirituality of the soul is included the fact that matter is composed, while thought is simple and without admixture, which implies a strict separation between thought and matter, and that matter must be without effect upon thought, for otherwise thought would be an attribute of matter.490 In this little treatise, we see clearly the appearance of confusion between the soul, the self, consciousness and thought. The soul is described therein as a spiritual thinking substance, the seat of sensation, of representation and of reflexive thought. Given this point of view, in proportion and according to the degree to which science will penetrate the mechanisms of sensation and the role of the brain, all the theological proofs for the spirituality of the soul will collapse.

We are observing a degeneration of the intelligible, which itself was a warped conception of the spiritual. This progressive reduction of the spiritual to the intellectual appears to be a more fundamental drama than the loss of angelic hierarchies or the reduction of the imaginal to the imaginary.

E. Gilson, Etude sur le role de la pensee medievale sur la formation du system cartesien, pp. 51-100.
Cardinal of Lucerne, Dissertation sur la spiritualite de l'ame, Paris, 1823.

In the Baha'i writings, the word "spiritual" has a different meaning. Of course, it always designates something which has the qualities of the spirit, but the word reveals something else.

That man is "spiritual" who expresses his true nature, that is to say, his divine nature. That which denotes the spirituality of the soul, is its capacity to reflect the divine Names and thus to be an image of its Creator. This image constitutes the divine deposit (amana). Spirituality thus exists in the soul only in the state of potentiality, even as intelligence is also potential in man. If a child never receives any education, his intelligence will not be developed; he may perhaps not even learn to speak. So also, the spirituality of the soul has need of exercise and practice to develop itself. It necessitates a work of purification and of transformation of the interior self. By approaching its Creator, it receives more fully the divine light which illumines it and permits it to radiate the divine Names in a more perfect manner. The spiritual qualities which are the reflection of these Names are thus perfections, even if they existed in latency at the beginning.

Thus Baha'i psychology avoids all possibility of confounding spirituality with thought. To deepen spirituality is to discover the true nature of man independently of any cognitive process.

Inversely, the knowledge of gnosis derives from this spirituality. The spiritual man is thus a gnostic man in the sense in which Clement of Alexandria employed this term.491 But we must not mistake this meaning—if man were to consecrate his life to the study of gnosis, never would this study make him more spiritual, inasmuch as spirituality is acquired through meditation accompanied by action. It is in acting upon the world in order to transform it that man transforms himself.

11. The nature of the soul and theory of knowledge

The determination of the nature of the soul and its relations with knowledge and the body is not just a metaphysical problem—it is above all an epistemological problem because it conditions the entire theory of knowledge. In the developments which will follow, we will only

to sketch this
problem, as our aim here is not to define a complete theory of knowledge, but only to show how
this knowledge of the spiritual worlds, which sustains all of Baha'i metaphysics, is possible. It is
thus in this sense that the nature of the soul interests us here, and in this sense only.

One of the requirements of this problem consists in determining if knowledge is an autonomous
activity of the soul, or a simple determination of consciousness by means of sensory or
imaginative perception; the intellective does not intervene in this case except to organize the
givens produced thereby.

To affirm that knowledge is an autonomous activity of the knowing spirit is a seductive concept
for the development of a theory of the imaginal, but it has metaphysical implications regarding
the nature of the world which may be thought to be incompatible with the metaphysic of
Baha'u'llah. Inversely, a theory of knowledge as simple determination of consciousness easily
arrives at nominalism.

In the Stomates, Clement of Alexandria declares: "Gnosis is the noetic intelligence of prophecy" (St. II,
54, 1.), which signifies that gnosis is the fruit of intuition who leads to spiritual hermeneutic, to ta'wil.
Elsewhere, he adds: "Faith in Christ and the gnosis of the Gospel are the exegesis and the following of
the law" (St. IV, 134, 3.).

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If we relate these problems to the thought of Baha'u'llah, we see that it is not easy to resolve
them, and it is sometimes astonishing to find how much his philosophy appears to participate in
two systems, or to be in relation to them. In fact, neither in Baha'u'llah, nor in 'Abdu'l-Baha is
there a complete theory of knowledge, but only a collection of givens which define the possible
theories, and which in turn exclude other models. Elsewhere, we know to what extent every
theory of knowledge is linked to a philosophy of language and thus to logic, and we also know to
what point both have made considerable progress in the past century. In order

to establish a theory of knowledge, it would be necessary to compare the Writings of Baha'u'llah with all those of the philosophers who have also treated this question, a task which surpasses our more modest ambitions.

In Platonism, the soul has direct access to the ideas which fill it, and hence it is in itself that it finds the elements of knowledge of the sensory, starting from the intelligible. It grasps the knowledge of individualities because of its knowledge of the totality, because in Platonism, the particular is contained in the universal.

For Aristotle, on the contrary, it is the particular which conducts to the universal. The human spirit grasps ideas, which are the immutable essences in objects. The individual precedes the kind which is deduced therefrom. The apprehension of Aristotelian forms like Platonic ideas is above all intuitive because for Aristotle it is only through the intuition that we return to unity, while for Plato this unity is transcendental.

Ibn Sina wished to construct his system upon different bases. It is because the individual soul participates in the universal soul, also called the instrumental intellect, that it has access to the world of essences upon which it establishes its knowledge of individual realities.

Baha'u'llah turns away from these three systems and takes a diagonal which traverses all the oppositions and transcends all of their contradictions. Also, his thought is neither nominalist nor realist.

We must remember that for him there is not a separation between the sensory and the intelligible as strict as in classical philosophy. Every sensory thing contains in itself an intelligible part, because the laws of the universe, upon which the existence of all things is based, are intelligible in nature. The sensory is thus more of a particular kind of the intelligible. It is thus starting from the intelligible that man understands the sensory, because of the power of reason ('aql) which is a function of the soul.

Reason is not a part of the soul. It is a faculty endowed with the capacity to reflect itself in the spirit of man, and thereby to discover that which is hidden in nature, that is, the intelligible. Thus to understand the intelligible is a spiritual faculty which belongs neither to the spirit nor to the body. It is however the spirit which makes usage of this faculty of the soul. Reason being that which distinguishes man from the animal, the capacity to have access to the intelligible is the right of man. It is for this reason that science, like religion, is inseparable from man. For as long as man has been man, there has been science, even if it was a proto-science colored with magic.

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Science is a characteristic of the anthropic Spirit. Science always existed because the anthropic Spirit always existed, because there needed to be a creature which could recognize the Creator.
The soul directly grasps the spiritual realities by connaturality; not that the soul can carry ideas in itself, either the kinds or the species, but because there exists between the soul and the spiritual world a “resemblance”, an identity of structures, an analogical relation, which is that of the divine Names. It is thus through these divine Names that we grasp spiritual realities and the relationship which distinguishes between the spiritual and the intelligible.

But spiritual knowledge is different from sensory knowledge. Sensory knowledge is the right of the spirit (nafs) which is in relationship with the senses and in which is found “the common faculty”492, also called the “discriminating faculty”493, which enables the five physical senses to communicate with the five intellectual faculties.494 In a certain fashion, spiritual knowledge is a noetic and intuitive process, while sensory knowledge is an epistemological and discursive process. Nevertheless, both end in reason, which is neither discursive, nor intuitive.

One could object that such a system has a hard time preserving the psychological unity of the subject. But for Baha’u’llah, this unity of the subject is assured simply by consciousness (damir) and by reason. This unity would be very difficult to maintain in a world

founded upon the
dualism of the sensory and the intelligible, the material and the spiritual.
But its existence is
established eo ipso in the world of the Pleroma. Nevertheless, it should be
seen that the unity of the
subject which we find affirmed in the Baha'i texts is of a very different
nature from the Cartesian
unity of subject. The unity of subject based upon cogito is an illusion as was
demonstrated by
Nietzsche and Freud. For Baha'u'llah, not only is the subject shared
between the obscure self and
the divine self, between the exigencies of the psyche (nafs) and of the
spiritual soul (ruh), between
the external meaning and the internal meaning, but even its manner of arriving
at knowledge of
the world and of self is founded upon a collection of functions which must
cooperate amongst
themselves, and which are able to do so because of the "common faculty".
Consciousness must
thus make an effort so that the unity of perception of the self and of the
world is not the result of
the predominance of one of the elements of our spiritual and intellectual
faculties to the
detriment of the others, as this would circumscribe our knowledge of reality.
It is here that we
realize that the knowledge of the exterior is founded upon the knowledge of the
interior, and vice
versa. Finally, recognition that consciousness is the product of a composition
which is capable of
speaking with several voices is far from the idea of the dissolution of the
subject as is found in
contemporary philosophy.

This conception of the unity of the subject and its participation in the world
of the Pleroma has
different levels with important consequences. Of a certainty, man begins from
the sensory to
elevate himself towards the spiritual through the analogical and homological
relationship
between the two worlds. But this does not involve the habitual consequences of
a pure idealism,
because the spiritual realities are well established as realities in
themselves. These realities in
themselves are individual realities, and this implies that the physical
individual is the image of the

493See footnote 192.

494See SAQ:LVI.

spiritual individual. There can not be a dissociation of one from the other. The essential realities are individual essences, and not participations in one of the same kind as in the Platonic system. On this point, Baha'u'llah is closer to Thomas than to Ibn Sina, even if his thought is incompatible with Aristotelianism.

12. The union of the soul and the body

The modality of the union of the soul and the body is a question that is found at the heart of all Christian Scholasticism, whereas Muslim Scholasticism seems to have been little concerned with this problem.

We have seen that the Fathers of the Church considered this union to be of two substances, the one material and the other spiritual. This superposition of substances posed many problems which Thomas thought himself able to resolve by saying that the soul is the form of the body, with all the consequences which that imposes. Christian Scholasticism always wanted the union of the soul and the body to be of substance, on the one hand because of the dogma of the bodily resurrection, and on the other hand because to set aside a union of substance led directly to the soul being considered an accident of the body; which became easy as soon as the soul was deprived of its autonomy and when it was made the seat of consciousness, of thought and of sensations.

To now understand the fashion in which Baha'u'llah resolves the problem, we must first make some clarifications in terminology. Scholasticism speaks of "substance" where we are used to speaking of "essence" and where Baha'u'llah speaks of "reality" (haqiqat). Shoghi Effendi says "essential reality." The word "substance" (ousia) comes from Aristotle, and has a sense fairly close to that of essence. Aristotle defines substance as "that which is not the predicate of a subject, but

of which other things are predicates”495. A little later, he adds that in a second sense, substance
can be defined as “the immanent cause of the existence of the beings of a nature such that they
are not affirmed of a subject”496. Substance is thus none other than an essence considered as
immanent to a subject and constituting its limit and its quiddity.497 The primal substance (prote
ousia) is the individual identical to the essence (to ti esti), in this sense that the essence is that which
permits one to pass from the individual to the universal. In Scholasticism, Thomas refines these
definitions and gave them a more systematic compass. In particular he made of the quiddity the
nature existing in a corporeal nature as object of the intellect. These terms have their exact
counterpart in Muslim scholasticism and we will see, when we arrive at his “Commentary on the
Hidden Treasure”, that ‘Abdu’l-Baha also employed this terminology.498 For this reason, it is not
without usefulness here to introduce this vocabulary.

According to this approach, one can give a substance to every level of reality. The soul is a

Aristotle, Metaphysique, Livre D, 8, 10-15; translated by J. Tricot, Vrin, ed. 1991, pp. 182-183.
Ibid.
Ibid., Livre D, 17.5-10, p. 205.
Tafsir-i-Kuntu Kanzan Makhfiyyan, in Makatib-i-’Abdu’l-Bahá, volume II, pp. 4-55. Provisional translation
by Moojan Momen, published in Bahá’í Studies Review, III:4.

substance, the body is a substance, but we are also obligated to give to the atoms which compose
the body a substance independent of the body, so that man becomes an entanglement of
substances. This difficulty was already perceived by Aristotle who spoke of a “multitude” of
substances. It is to avoid this difficulty that Thomas posited the unity of the substance in the
human composition by making the soul the substantial form which can be neither a substance
nor an essence for form is not a reality in itself, but an intellectual reality ('aqli) which does not
exist independently from the spirit of man. At the minimum, this is what we think we can deduce

from his system of thought and it is found confirmed in the “Commentary on the Hidden
Treasure” of ‘Abdu’l-Baha.

The soul must be an essence, that is, a reality which transcends the body, not an immanent
reality like the substantial form. So how are we to avoid having the human whole become a
confusion of essences? It is here that Baha’u’llah envisions a radical solution, totally coherent with
his system, which doubtless would have struck with terror, at an epoch in which men were
burned at the stake for less than that, our Scholastic theologians shut up in their scriptorium. He
reduces the body to a simple accident of the soul.499

It is here that we see the reappearance of the spiritual hierarchies and the divine worlds. We can
speak in the Thomist sense of the essence of man or of the essence of the atoms of the body,
because these essences are intelligible realities: but these essences do not have the same
ontological modality. They are not in the same world. The soul belongs to Malakut, which makes
it a spiritual reality (haqiqat), while the essence (jawhar) of the atoms belongs to the world of Mulk,
and this is nothing but an intelligible reality. A spiritual reality cannot be linked in substance to a
material reality, even through its essence. The link which exists must be other than substantial.
For Baha’u’llah, it is transparent. The body is a mirror which must be illumined by the light of
the soul. The soul is reflected in it but does not descend into it. Such is the nature of their
relationship without the intervention of any substance. But we must not forget that in this
transparent theology it is the image which, in projecting itself, causes the mirror to appear.

Let us note that this conception of the soul maintains the transcendental character of the essence,
with the existence of the individual being considered the first reality. Thus the metaphysic of
Baha’u’llah escapes the terrible antinomy of Platonism and Peripatetism which has weighted
down Western philosophy like death. Henceforth, nominalism is no more to be feared, for the
existence of individual subjects is affirmed in transcendence.

In summary, the soul is a spiritual reality which is transcendental in its relation to the body—
which is an accident thereof—and with which it carries on a transparent relation which is the
only relationship possible between two realities of different ontological degrees.

SAQ:LXVI:277: “If the accident, that is to say the body, be destroyed, the substance, the spirit
remains.” The translation here must certainly be corrected so that we speak of the soul rather than the
spirit in order to translate the word ruh of the Persian text.

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13. Consciousness and the divine self

This new solution brought to the old problem of the union of the soul and the body helps us to
better understand the value of a trichotomic psychology. The transcendental character of the
soul renders it inappropriate as the seat of thought, of sentiments and of sensations. All of these
psychological modalities fall into the category of the spirit (nafs).

The spirit is born from the interaction of the soul and the body, and in particular the animal
spirit with the soul endowed with reason. Our conscious thought is at the same time the reflection
of the spirituality of our soul and of the contents of our spirit, which, at the start, is essentially
preoccupied with sensation, because it must satisfy the appetites of the body. Thus, we would say
that, the opposite from Descartes, Baha’u’llah renders thought closely dependent upon the body;
this is underlined by the fact that thought is the product of consciousness and that consciousness
is precisely that which assures the unity of the human composition. This consciousness is the
product of the body, the spirit and the soul, for when I think of “me”, I think of myself as a
whole. This consciousness is dependent upon numerous contingent elements, the first of which is
language, without which discursive thought would not exist. We can thus say that all thought
having recourse to language is a thought pertaining to the spirit (nafs), while intuitive thought
which directly grasps the relation between things comes from the soul (ruh), without our being

able to entirely exclude the mediation of the spirit.

One of the proofs advanced by Baha'u'llah to establish the distinction between the spirit and the soul, is found in the example of mental illness. Madness is the result of an obstacle being interposed between the rational faculty of the soul and the spirit. Hence, if man loses his mind, he does not lose his thought.

The appearance of the rational faculty in the spirit depends however on the body. For the reflection of the spirit in the mirror of the body, which creates the transitory phenomenon of the soul, is not possible except if the body has attained a sufficient degree of maturity and if its composed contents are in harmony. Thus 'Abdu'l-Baha declares: "when these existing elements are gathered together according to the natural order, and with perfect strength, they become a magnet for the spirit, and the spirit will become manifest in them with all its perfections."500

At the time of death, the spirit disappears with the body. This cannot happen without a profound transformation of consciousness. It finds itself expanded because it now has direct access to spiritual realities, but at the same time it is brutally stripped of all the idiosyncrasies that one is used to consider as determining elements of the individual personality. This shows how much our personality and our human identity are illusory. Only our divine self will subsist, that is to say the soul as essence reflecting the divine Names. The eternity of the soul is thought of as a radical modification of consciousness, a modification which will be at the same time an enlargement.

SAQ:LII:234-235.

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THIRD PART:
METAPHYSICS

CHAPTER ELEVEN:
THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND TECHNICAL VOCABULARY OF BAHA'U'LLAH

1. A unique problem in religious history

The emergence of the Baha'i Revelation can be considered a phenomenon which

is, in many
regards, unique in the history of religions. For the first time, a religion appears in the context of a
developed civilization, and, as a consequence of this context, from the very commencement of its
history, is in contact with an established religion, with a culturally rich environment in which we find
the interpenetration of highly developed philosophical, political and social movements. Moses and
Muhammad preached to tribes in the desert with cultures limited to their indigenous traditions.
Zoroaster lived in an environment which was not much different from this. Buddha appeared in a
country that certainly had a long religious tradition, and in which several philosophical schools were
competing, but this philosophical culture was the lot of a tiny minority while the masses remained
far removed from all intellectual subtleties. Jesus appeared in a country with a deep rabbinical
tradition and showed on many occasions that he had perfectly mastered this culture. However, this
culture was often regarded as strange and unfamiliar by the people, and besides had but little
influence upon the subsequent development of Christianity. Christianity and Islam later
encountered Greek culture, but this was only after the death of their Founders, Jesus and
Muhammad, and their assimilation of Greek culture posed enormous problems. It is thus the first
time in the religious history of humanity that we see a new religion appear in a society which has
attained a high cultural level. This of course poses specific problems which no other Founder of
religion had to resolve. Before entering in more detail upon the analysis of Baha'i texts in order to
distinguish the elements of a metaphysic, we should attempt to look at some of these problems in
greater depth.

2. Cultural heritage

The first problem is that of vocabulary and what we could call the level of language of the
Revelation. Muhammad, in order to express the new concepts of Islam, and because of the poverty
in abstract vocabulary of the Arabic of the Hijaz, had to have recourse to borrowings from foreign
languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic, Yemenite and Pahlavi. Baha'u'llah, in

comparison, expressed himself in Arabic and Persian, languages which already had a long existence, a rich cultural past, and which abounded with mystic, metaphysical and philosophical terms. Baha'u'llah could not have ignored the richness of his Arabo-Persian culture. Not only did he inherit the Qur'anic language and the vast Persian literature, but he also had to take account of the cultural contributions of the various Muslim mystical movements and of numerous philosophical schools the teaching of which had been transmitted to his very epoch. Not only could he not avoid having recourse to a vocabulary which

they bequeathed to him, but nor could he ignore the problems which had been nourished during numerous centuries.

Faced with this situation, Baha'u'llah chose to assume his linguistic heritage in its totality. He had recourse to the collection of vocabulary which Persian and Arabic could supply him, and the words that he employs, are borrowed from horizons of the most divers thoughts. We find also in him very numerous terms which are used in the Qur'an as well a vocabulary borrowed from Hellenistic philosophy501, from the Scholastic mutakalimin, from Neoplatonism502, from the metaphysic of Ibn al-'Arabi, from Sufism and from different mystical schools, from the illuminative theosophy of the Ishraqis, from Shaykhism, etc. We must not forget the fundamental influence of the Bab, who, in his numerous commentaries on the Qur'an, appropriated a part of the Qur'anic vocabulary in giving the words new and generally metaphorical definitions, sometimes far distant from the original meaning. The Bab did not hesitate to forge new concepts with an altogether new vocabulary. The very concept of "divine Manifestation" was largely elaborated in the "Persian Bayan" before being taken up again by Baha'u'llah in the "Book of Certitude".

3. The technical aspects of the vocabulary of Baha'u'llah

To grasp the meaning of this technical vocabulary is sometimes difficult, because the Arabo-Muslim philosophical vocabulary is fairly poor and, in any case, was not developed in

the same fashion as
the European philosophical vocabulary. In the West, when a philosopher invented a new concept,
he took care to underline his originality in creating a new expression whether it be a new word
created from the Greek or Latin, or be it an expression composed of several words apt to convey his
thought. In the East, the philosophers rarely invented words or expressions. The major linguistic
inventory took place in the first three centuries of Islam once the principal works of Hellenistic
philosophy had been translated from Greek and from Syriac, which required the creation ex nihilo
of the necessary Arabic vocabulary. After this period of translation, the philosophical language was
not much enriched. Every time a philosopher was brought to the creation of a new concept or to the
transformation of an ancient concept in a significant manner he had to have recourse to the use of
an ancient term without being able to modify it nor to create a new word from a root as the Western
languages themselves did based on Latin and Greek. It results that the philosophical terms
constantly change in meaning according to the schools and according to the authors. This is
explained by the fact that the Muslim thinkers did not accord any value to originality. Their
philosophical quest is the study of an Urphilosophie, of a pure truth, atemporal, in which the
expression of the individual has no place, and which is not, as in the West, the search for a meaning
in life. The problem is complicated when the authors have themselves hidden the definition of
certain terms which they used so that these would not be known except by their disciples, as is the
case for Shaykhism. Sometimes, they even voluntarily sought to lead the profane reader into error
upon the meaning of certain of their expressions, so as to protect themselves from any accusation of
heresy.

Certain problems pose themselves when the vocabulary is clearly of Greek origin, or when it has

Such as, for example, 'unsur (element), hayula (matter), zarra (atom), illa (cause).
Such as, for example, fayd (emanation), 'alam al-mithal (imaginal world).

a Latin equivalent which can itself come from the Greek by means of Arabic, in order to translate an equivalent Arabic expression. Must one truly translate mahiyya by quiddity? The Arabic word comes from the same Greek expression as the Latin quiditas. The question “Ma huwa?” is the exact translation of the Greek “Ti to on?” to which one responds with “To ti en einai”.503 Quiditas, from “quid?”, “what is that?”, was elsewhere wrought to translate Ibn Sina into Latin. But the history of this word in the West diverges thereafter profoundly from that of its representation in the East. In Persia, the word took on a great diversity of significances according to the Schools. It is why we can ask ourselves if the word mahiyya should be translated by quiddity. Faced with these problems, Shoghi Effendi took an option which could not be ours for purely philological reasons. He concentrated upon the spiritual meaning of the writings of Baha’u’llah and he often renounced the rendering of the philosophical sense. We lose in the English translations multiple allusions to the ambient culture which it would have been impossible to render into a foreign language. It often happens that Shoghi Effendi had to transpose images which in English would have lost all significance, thereby rendering a member of a phrase by one word or a word by a complete phrase. In all the cases, it was impossible for him to render the richness of the mystical and philosophical contents of the Arabic or Persian language.

The philosophical vocabulary which Baha’u’llah inherited is thus extremely fluid and every word calls for a study in order to arrive at its precise meaning. Baha’u’llah furthermore never tried to make this vocabulary precise. He never gives the definition of a word. It is ‘Abdu’l-Baha who most often brought forth the indispensable precisions. One can sometimes give several interpretations to a text based on whether one gives to a word the meaning derived, for example, from the Shaykhi or Ishraqi vocabulary. The vocabulary of Baha’u’llah fluctuates greatly and it can vary in different texts based on those for whom they were revealed, as can be seen sometimes

in the same text. For example, as we have already seen, in certain Tablets the word ruh signifies
“soul” and nafs signifies “spirit”, while in other Tablets, it is nafs
which signifies “soul” and ruh
which signifies “spirit”. It seems that it was Baha’u’llah who
consciously chose this form of
writing, underlining thereby that what he wanted to say was found beyond words and must be
directly grasped by the intuition. Furthermore, to utilize a philosophical vocabulary carefully
defined would have certainly resulted in his formulation of a philosophical and metaphysical
system, and this above all he did not want to do. For the role of a divine Manifestation is not to
found a philosophical school. This role must be left to the thinkers of future generations.

We find in the writings of Baha’u’llah philosophical and metaphysical conceptions, but these
conceptions do not form a system in the sense in which a system is completed by itself. Divine
Revelation does not allow itself to be imprisoned in any system. Hence we do not find in
Baha’u’llah a single didactic treatise. The mission of a divine Manifestation does not consist in
resolving philosophical problems, nor more than it is to resolve the problems of physics or of
biology. On the other hand, we find in ‘Abdu’l-Baha and notably in “Some Answered
Questions”, a certain number of didactic treatises in which ‘Abdu’l-Baha uses, with much
dexterity, the vocabulary of the old Muslim scholastics much impregnated with Aristotelianism
and Platonism, in order to happily clarify the writings of Baha’u’llah. This explains why we have
often been moved to found our views on the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Baha, more than on those of
Baha’u’llah, in order to explain the great themes of the ontological thought of the founder of the
Baha’i Faith.
E. Gilson, “L'Etre et l'Essence”, Paris, 1987, pp. 56-64.

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4. The implicit character of the metaphysic of Baha’u’llah

The philosophical and metaphysical concepts of Baha’u’llah appear more often in an implicit
than in an explicit manner. This is what we have seen in the preceding chapter

in the very
precise study of the vocabulary of the divine worlds, notably in the compilation of the Munajat.
Our study in this chapter was essentially philological. We will now try to give it a philosophical
and metaphysical sense. As Buddha did formerly, Baha'u'llah sought to stay apart from the
philosophical and theological disputes of his time. Baha'u'llah often cites and mentions the great
Persian poets, but he only very exceptionally cites the Muslim philosophers and theologians.
When then Baha'u'llah takes on a philosophical problem, it is never through the different
elements of a battle of schools, but at their most general and universal level. Never does
Baha'u'llah respond to an argument. He contents himself always with exposing the problem and
its solution in making an abstract of the battles. The best example of this method is the book
"Seven Valleys" which gives exposition to the Baha'i concept of the union of man with God and
which is indirectly a refutation of pantheism and of the concept of existential monism of the
school of Hallaj and of Ibn al-'Arabi.

In the "Tablet upon the Uncompounded Reality" (Lawh-i-Basitu'l-Haqiqat)504, Baha'u'llah gives
and exposition of the two ontological conceptions of his epoch: that of the existential monism of
Ibn al-'Arabi and that of the testimonial monism of the Orthodox school. However the two
statements are slanted. Neither is a statement which is faithful either to existential monism or to
testimonial existentialism, because on the one hand Baha'u'llah wished to retain from these two
systems only what seemed compatible to him with his thought, and on the other hand, he takes
care to present them as two complementary points of view and not as two opposing theories.
Thus he takes shelter from all polemic. Even though Baha'u'llah is far removed from the position
of Ibn al-'Arabi, he never allows an abrupt condemnation to surface and he always puts forward
what is most positive in the teaching of the Shaykh. That can sometimes be fairly confusing, for
when Baha'u'llah reports the opinion of a school or of a master, it is often in order to express his

own ideas in a disguised manner so as not to offend the consciousness of his public. ‘Abdu’l-Baha
uses the same processes in his “Commentary on the Hidden Treasure”.

The understanding of the mystical and philosophical concepts of Baha’u’llah results from a very
precise study of the texts and thus of their vocabulary, without ever forgetting that the same word
may receive several definitions. We can distinguish three large classes of vocabulary: the Qur'anic
vocabulary, the philosophical and theological vocabulary, and the mystical and poetic
vocabulary.

Each of these classes is subdivided into numerous sub-classes. It is not sufficient for example to
assert that a [particular] term is of Qur'anic origin, for one must also know the interpretations
[thereof] by the principal exegetes. We have seen that the word Malakut is Quranic, but we would
not understand its meaning in the writings of Baha’u’llah if we did not know its history in the
exegetical and philosophical literature of Islam. Furthermore, the Bab himself wrote a very large
number of commentaries on the Qur'an in which he gives a totally new meaning to Qur'anic
terms, to which Baha’u’llah constantly makes reference.

Iqtidarat, pp. 105-116; Ma'idiy-i-Asmani, volume VII, pp. 140-147.

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The mystical and poetic vocabulary of Baha’u’llah is much more simple in approach. It is
founded upon what we could call the culture of the “genteel man” of his epoch, a culture
essentially nourished by poetry with the great poets whom he cites the most frequently: Rumi,
'Attar, Hafiz and Sa'adi. Once more one must be careful [with regard to the interpretation] of
this vocabulary which contains numerous twistings and turnings of meaning. Baha’u’llah often
proceeds through veiled allusions which are neither easily nor immediately accessible.

5. The Neoplatonic influence upon Persian culture

But the vocabulary which poses the most problems is surely the philosophical and theological
vocabulary of Baha’u’llah. It is less abundant than the Qur'anic

vocabulary, but it does not present the advantage [as does this latter one] of having a standard text and a single source. This vocabulary is essentially Neoplatonic. By Neoplatonic we must understand [that this refers to] the Muslim Neoplatonism, which is the synthesis of Platonism, Aristotelianism and the Neoplatonism of Plotin and Proclus, upon which are superimposed the personal contributions of Abu Nasr al-Farabi and of Ibn Sina. It also includes the contributions of the Ishraqiyyun, the School of Isfahan, and the Shaykhis.

This implies that certain texts of Baha'u'llah cannot be well understood without a good knowledge of Islamic Neoplatonism, and that Islamic Neoplatonism cannot be known except through a good knowledge of the totality of Greek philosophy. We will see very exact examples of this. For this reason, before considering the essential metaphysical problems which are posed by the Baha'i concept of the divine worlds, and more particularly the relations between the spiritual worlds and our physical world, we will examine the elements of Greek and Muslim philosophy which are related to that which interests us.

Of course, this poses the question of whether Baha'u'llah was himself a Neoplatonist, as some have affirmed. The fact that Baha'u'llah used Neoplatonic vocabulary poses complex questions which touch upon philology, metaphysics and even the philosophy of history. This brings us to pose the problem of the status of the Greek philosophers in the history of revelation.

Baha'u'llah knew the history of Greek philosophy very well. In the "Tablet of Wisdom", he cites Empedocles, Hippocrates, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.505 For him, it is manifest that the most important of all is Socrates, whom he calls "the most distinguished of all philosophers"506, and he says of him that he not only mastered the sciences courant among men [of his time], but also "those which were veiled from their minds."507 For him, Socrates was very close to divine inspiration, and he attributes to him the essence of the philosophical merits of Plato. It is

astonishing that Baha'u'llah consecrated such an important development to Greek philosophy
and that he speaks so little of the Muslim philosophers. But without doubt he was keenly
conscious of the dependency of Muslim philosophy upon Greek philosophy.

He also cites under the Arabized name Balinus a philosopher who is probably Appolonius of Tyana.
TB:146. The Arabic says "siyyid al-falasafa" which is to say "master", "lord", "chief" of the
philosophers.
TB:146.

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Baha'u'llah does not content himself with using a Neoplatonic vocabulary. His thought
sometimes takes a clearly platonic turn, and this upon at least three points. The metaphysic of
Baha'u'llah is presented as a philosophy of emanation. In certain of his Tablets, he seems to
confirm the idea of a world of archetypes [as an] intermediary between the physical world and
the spiritual worlds. It is this intermediary world which the philosophers call "Imaginal World".
Finally, certain texts of Baha'u'llah seem to confirm a division of reality into an intelligible world
and a sensible world. We will attempt to respond to these questions in the chapters which follow
our general exposition on Neoplatonism.

This vaguely Neoplatonic allure has misled numerous Islamicists who have not seen the
originality of the thought of Baha'u'llah. Our study will show that if the metaphysic of
Baha'u'llah is a philosophy of emanation, the expression of the concept and the metaphysical
conceptions which underlie it are totally original.

If we had to attach Baha'u'llah to a school of thought, it would be less to the Neoplatonism of
Plotin or Proclus than to Platonism itself. And this is not astonishing because it was Socrates and
Plato who opened for antiquity the only possible path between personal investigation of Nature
and the Cosmos and the discovery of a transcendent God. For Baha'u'llah, there is a religion of
Socrates and Plato, but this religion is inspired and not revealed. In this, he moreover follows Al-

Ghazali and Suhrawardi. This also explains why in many respects Baha'i thought is often closed to the solutions retained by Christianity than to those of the principal schools of Islam.

There is however a fundamental point upon which Baha'u'llah diverges from Plato and approaches Aristotle. Plato adopted certain ideas of Democritusxxiii on change and he thought that the sensible world is a moving and ungraspable world about which man cannot establish any certitude. Certitude could not come except from the Intelligible World. For this reason, for Plato, it is only when man has truly understood the nature of the One that he can descend into the understanding of the multiple. It is thus, as in Descartes, the metaphysical which conditions the physical. For Aristotle, on the contrary, only the study of the multiple can, in permitting us to follow the chain of causality, enable us to comprehend the intelligible world. Without certain [knowledge] of the sensible world, never could man elevate himself to the contemplation of the intelligible. In Baha'u'llah we find the same doubt regarding the capacities of human intuition to elevate itself directly to the knowledge of spiritual realities. Man by himself cannot have any certitude regarding spiritual realities, while as for knowledge of the sensible world, reason permits him to attain an acceptable degree of certitude. This explains why Baha'u'llah amply validates science in general, and especially Western science. It is only through the power of Revelation and the teaching of the divine Manifestations that man can attain certitude with regard to the spiritual worlds. Nevertheless, the metaphorical character of the sensible world permits us to elevate ourselves towards the spiritual world according to a certain measure. When man wishes to grasp the nature of spiritual realities, he is the prisoner of the language [in place in his environment], which exists only as a function of the realities of the sensible world. The only way open thus consists in relying upon the revelation to elevate it from the sensible to the spiritual, from the multiple to the Cause of causes. Baha'u'llah however diverges from Aristotle in that he

does not place complete confidence in reason. For him, Revelation reason, tradition and intuition are four modes of knowledge which must be used in a complementary manner. Even Revelation must be validated by reason.

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Christianity also makes of Neoplatonism its philosophical language, not without this bringing about a grave crisis, the Origenist crisis of the 3rd century. But the Fathers of the Church, such as Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyassa, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianze totally revised this philosophical doctrine in order to make it a critical and tempered reception which would permit its adaptation to the doctrine of the Gospels. During almost one thousand years, from Pseudo-Denis the Areopagite until Bonaventure, Neoplatonism was the philosophical language of the expression of Christianity, until Thomas Aquinas replaced it with Aristotelianism which in his eyes had the advantage of being able to explain trans-substantiation.

During a millennium Neoplatonism was the lingua franca of the philosophical world. Not only did it impose itself from the 3rd century onwards among the Greek pagans, not only was it adopted by Christians, but it extended even among the Semitic populations of Syria and in the Persian empire. In the East, it was promoted with Greek medicine, which was the best of its epoch, and thus benefited from the prestige which was recognized even among the Arabs.

Neoplatonism was thus a universal language of the great revealed religions. It is perhaps this universality which resulted in Baha'u'llah adopting its vocabulary. We must nevertheless take care not to draw the thought of Baha'u'llah towards Platonism. Borrowings of vocabulary can sometimes translate a kinship of thought, nothing more. If Baha'u'llah conserved the central concept of emanation, we will see that upon most of the other points, his thought enters into conflict with Platonism, as will all of the philosophical systems of his time. Nonetheless, it seems to us that it is not possible to understand the philosophical thought of Baha'u'llah without having

first situated it in relation to the principle philosophical schools of his epoch. This is why we will consecrate an entire chapter to Neoplatonism which seems to us a fundamental point of reference.

CHAPTER TWELVE:
THE EVOLUTION OF NEOPLATONISM FROM ITS ORIGINS TO BAHA'U'LLAH

Neoplatonism was born of the specific needs of man in the 3rd century, tied to the Greek crisis of individualism, to the dissolution of the city in the cosmopolitan empire, and to the aspiration for a new rational religion capable of giving a new meaning to life.

1. The Neoplatonism of Plotinus

Neoplatonism has a complex history. We must not forget that at the moment in which Plotinus founded what it is convenient to call the Neoplatonic School, the doctrine of Plato had already existed for more than six centuries.508 It had followed over the course of time a long evolution

Plato was born c. 427 B.C.E. and died c. 347 B.C.E. Plotinus was born in 205 C.E. and died in 270

which passed through the Megarite and Cyrenaite Schools, the new Academy of Arcesilas, to end in Middle-Platonism, which is a doctrine already mixed liberally with Stoicism and Pythagoreanism, to which were added heterogenous influences, perhaps some having come from the East, which Festugere regrouped under the name of "cosmic religion".509 However, in the 3rd century, Middle-Platonism no longer had any vigor. It had completely dissolved into an eclectic doctrine in which the Stoic elements dominated increasingly, even as they dominated the intellectual life of this epoch. Precisely at this epoch, when Christianity had become a religion solidly rooted and that it had begun to touch the intellectual elites, Plotinus, born at Lycopolis in Egypt, encountered Alexander Amonius Saccas who, probably born into a Christian family, had renounced Christianity to find what he considered the pure religion of his ancestors and to teach

philosophy. Amonius initiated Plotinus to the doctrine of Plato, and this one was to give upon this base a completely new reading of the platonic philosophy. This new reading was to take its rank in the history of philosophy under the name “Neoplatonism”.

What characterizes Neoplatonism above all, is its extraordinary metaphysical coherence and its adaptation to the spiritual needs of the 3rd century man. In contrast to Platonism, Neoplatonism has profound mystical dimension which demands of man a true transcendence of oneself in order to permit one to find again one's true nature. He asks man to uproot himself from the sensible world in order to seek the “unveiling” of superior things and to thus know the ecstasy of union with the One. At the same time, Neoplatonism presents itself as a theodicy permitting, through the rational path, to apprehend the nature of the suprasensible worlds. Neoplatonism considers itself to be a global doctrine which explains the origin of the world and clarifies the destiny of man in an epoch which was the prey of metaphysical doubt in which cultivated men, as the Memoirs of Marcus Aurelius show us, attempted to combat an existential anguish that the classical age did not know, and who fled the crowd in order to find outside of the city a new meaning in life and in death. Plotinus brought to this new responses which were partly mystical and partly rational. He arrives at formulating a system which is perfectly closed within itself in order to give a global response to the nature of the universe and the destiny of man because of concepts which were totally new and revolutionary for the epoch, such as emanation and the procession of the hypostases.

In a certain fashion, Neoplatonism resulted in a dualism which opposes matter to the intelligible world (we would call it spiritual today). The desire of Plato to avoid for the One, the principle of all things, all contact with the sensible world excluded all act of volition in the creation and thus all relation between a Creator and His creature. The One does not intervene in the destiny of men; it is for the human soul to come out of himself in order to elevate himself towards the divine

only by means of his efforts. The meeting between the one and the other is made in an act of
"participation" which is at the same time an act of knowledge. The genius of Plotinus did not
only contain heterogeneous elements as in Middle-Platonism; he linked them profoundly among
themselves to the means of totally new concepts such as the idea of procession and of emanation,
which for the epoch appeared not as philosophical speculations, but as incontestable scientific
truths capable of engendering a new paradigm of science, replacing the Aristotelian model. But

C.E.
Festugiere, "La Revelation d'Hermes Trismegiste", in particular volume II, "Le Dieu cosmique," and
volume III, "La doctrine de l'Ame, le Dieu inconnu et la gnose".

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Plotinus, more than anything else contributed to the reconciliation of pagan philosophy with
Christianity. He considerably amplified a phenomenon of convergence, which without doubt
already existed, and which resulted from this Zeitgeist which so well marked the 3rd century.510

2. The problem with Neoplatonism

We do not seek to present here the whole of the doctrine of Plotinus, and we will be content with
simply giving exposition to certain points which could be useful in a comparison with the thought
of Baha'u'llah. But before entering into his system, we must explain some elements of its genesis.

At the origin of the system is found the universal problem which is found in all religious and
philosophical thought: that of the uprising of the existent from the non-existent. This cosmogonic
problem is found at the heart of the pre-socratic writings, which progressively rendered
philosophy to the form which Plato received as an heritage. This problem is posed in the
Hellenistic culture in very original terms because the Greeks had come to the conclusion that the
universe could not be born except in a first and essential singularity, which is to say, a unique
principle, the alpha point, source of all things. It is this singularity which Plotinus will specifically

call the “One”. Already for the presocratics, the fundamental problem posed by the existence of the universe resided in the passage of the one to the multiple; how could a unique principle, whether it be water, air or fire, be able to engender all of the other elements? Plato and Aristotle took up the problem again, not from the physical angle like the Eleatics, but from the metaphorical and especially the ontological angle. It is this perspective which Plotinus inherits.

Posed in these terms, the problem changes in nature, for it opposes on one side all that is singular in the universe, that is to say in the world of multiplicity. Another traditional fashion of posing the same problem in other terms, consists in affirming that the first singularity is established in permanence and immutability, while the physical universe represents to him the world of change, of impermanence and of mutability. This approach is found already in Empedocles with the question of being and non-being, and in Heraclitus with that of movement and change.

We remember that Plato treated these problems in masterful manner. He brought back the change of movement and he had found the cause of this in the Soul which at the same time communicates the order of the cosmos because of the Intelligence which is in it.511 The Soul of the world is the cause of the movement of the world and the Intelligence which is in the soul contemplates the eternal ideas which communicate to him the cosmic order which it transmits to the world through movement. The system of Plato is extremely complex, for on the side of Ideas, of the Soul and the Intelligence, he introduces multiple concepts such as the Good, the Beautiful, the Same and the Other, the Being or the Chora. Good, identical to Beauty, is the principle which penetrates all and prevails over all; it is from this that the cosmic order is derived, and it is this which loans its properties to the universe, and in particular Intelligence, Being, life, unicity and incorruptibility. The Same and the Other form the divisible and the indivisible substance of the Soul which assures the ontological link between the world of Ideas and the sensible world. The

Same is of the same substance as the ideas—it is the principle of determination—while the Other

As for the concept of Zeitgeist in late Antiquity, cf. our study “Les paradigmes caches de l'Histoire,” in “Actes de l'Association Europeene Francophone pour les Etudes Bahá’ís”, 1987.

Plato, Timaeus, 30b5.

represents the principle of indetermination.512 The Chora itself is a limit to the order which transposes the influence of the Other in the sensible domain and thus finds itself [able] to be the cause of the appearance of the multiple. The chora is neither being, nor space, nor matter. It does not have form, for it is a pure intelligible, a place limited to the junction of the sensible and the intelligible which permits the final Cause to communicate its action and in this way to organize the Cosmos. Thus, the Chora introduced to the world the change and mutability which are at the origin of the multiple, for if on the one hand the existence of the essences restores from the Same like a principle of identity, on the other hand, the essence appears just like the Other, for it is by this that differentiation appears.

We have simplified here what in Plato is very complex, to the point that his doctrine sometimes appears to be confused and difficult to grasp. This exposition was nevertheless necessary in order to comprehend to what extend Neoplatonism can be different from the Platonism of Plato. It is important to understand the originality of Plotinus, but also because on certain points the thought of Baha’u’llah appears, as we see, sometimes closer to Plato than to Plotinus.

The genius of Plotinus was to simplify the doctrine of Plato while giving it a new coherence. This simplification never appears to be an impoverishment, but on the contrary, it permits because of the introduction of some new concepts to demultiply the explanatory power of the system. In a certain fashion, the system of Plotinus, passing through the razor of Ockham, appears more aesthetic and more elegant, and from this fact it more easily motivated the adhesion of the heart

and of the spirit.

Plato was more interested in the principle of the universe than in its true origin. The emergence of the Cosmos is a problem which Plato does not resolve except at the level of Myth in making the Demiurge intervene. Plotinus supercedes the intervention of the Demiurge and situates the emergence of Existence outside of time in a domain of abstract causes. He brings together the disparate entities which are, for Plato, Beauty, Good, Being and Life and fuses them into a unique principle which he calls “the One”.

3. The One

The One is the principle of all things. It is eternal, outside of time, unengendered, immobile, immutable, self-subsisting and entirely enveloped in itself. It is beyond being513, but being proceeds from it. It is from it that all beings ultimately have their existence. It produces the forms but it is not engaged in any act as creator. It has no movement, does not know alteration, it is anterior to movement and thought.514

There is a certain similitude between “the Same” and “the Other” in Plato, and the two great forces, active (fa'il) and receptive (munfa'il) about which Bahá’u’lláh speaks in the “Tablet of Wisdom” (Lawh-i-Hikmat) in saying that it is by the energy generated by their interaction, we would say their union, that the universe has come into existence. Similar similarities are explained by the theory of “the active imagination” ('aql) as a property of the soul.

Enneads, V.1,10.

Ibid., VI.9,6.

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The problem which Plotinus next poses is that of the passage from transcendence to immanence. The One is situated in such a degree of transcendence that we cannot imagine that there could be the least contact between it and the world. Hence the world must proceed from it without compromising this transcendence. This requires on the one hand the existence of intermediaries, and, on the other hand that these intermediaries themselves proceed from the One, without this

implying any act of will on its part, no engagement in a creative activity.

The only activity of the One is the contemplation of itself. In this contemplation it understands itself and the appearance of its own image. In its consciousness are born the elements of a duality which will permit the appearance of a second hypostasis which is Intelligence.515

4. Intelligence

It is Intelligence which is truly responsible for the passage of the One to the multiple. In it is found the principle of the One, a principle which is constantly reactualized in the contemplation in which Intelligence is found to be engaged. It is thus "incapable of containing the power that it receives from the One, fragmenting and multiplying it so as in this way to be able to sustain it bit by bit."516 Thus appears a principle of differentiation which establishes that it contains all the potential intelligibilities, and as a consequence, all beings. The Plotinian Intelligence corresponds in form to the platonic world of Ideas, and it is thus from Intelligence that the Muslim philosophers constructed the Imaginal World. Intelligence is the form of forms (la datur formarum of Scholasticism), and thereby it is the model of the sensible world.

The principal characteristic of Intelligence is its psychic activity, for it is from this activity that the multiplicity of intelligibilities are born. Intelligence contemplates the One and contemplates itself; this contemplation in itself and upon itself changes into action and hence is born the Soul, the third hypostasis.

5. The Soul

If Intelligence possesses in itself the archetype of the world and of its order, the mode of being of Intelligence, while permitting the appearance of a duality with the One and a multiplicity of intelligibles, nonetheless forbids him all relation with the sensible world. The passage from the intelligible to the sensible takes place through the intermediary of the Soul. The Soul is differentiated from Intelligence by the fact that it does not have its immobility. The Soul is an active and mobile principle which is the organizing force of the sensible world

which it suffuses
and penetrates. From the Soul emanate the seminal reasons (logos spermatikoi) of the world, which
themselves are, in some way, fragmentation. The seminal reasons represent the intermediary
between the Soul and the living beings which are engendered by the act of the Soul. They hold
in themselves all of the potentialities which are called upon to develop in the sensible being; they
contain its program of development and the laws of its evolution; and it is through their
Certain ones call Intelligence “the Intellect”. We here prefer to follow
the usage of Brehier for the same
reasons that he explains in his book on Plotinus and his philosophy.
Enneads, VI.7,15.

intermediation that the link between the Soul and the beings of the sensible world is
effectuated.517

6. The procession

The scheme which goes from the One to the Soul, and from the Soul to the sensible world
constitutes what Plotinus calls the procession (kathados). The concept of progression replaces the
concept of creation in Plotinian thought. For the Greeks, ex nihilo creation is impossible. Plotinus
also rejects the idea of a Demiurge God. Creation is an act, while the procession explains the
world by a scheme which establishes the ontological link between the different modes of being.
This point would be the principal stumbling-block to the integration of Neoplatonism with
Christianity and Islam. Despite this difficulty, we must not underestimate the importance of the
idea of the procession. The concept will impose itself because of its explanatory power in the
absence of any idea of evolution. The idea of procession thus constitutes a true paradigm which
will determine all the philosophical and scientific thought at least until the 18th century in the
West and until the 20th century in the Islamic [realms]. Brehier had good reason to write that the
idea which the procession evokes “is comparable, in its universal generality and its historical
importance, to the idea of evolution; men at the end of Antiquity and from the

Middle Ages
thought of things in the category of the procession as those of the 19th and 20th century thought of
them in the category of evolution.”518

The concept of procession thus explains not only how the forms depend upon each other, but
also the meaning of the hierarchy which derives therefrom and what we could call the laws of
“mutation” to avoid the modern term evolution. The procession contains in itself its own
principle of determination; nothing is left to change.

7. Emanation

The explanatory force of the concept of procession is elucidated through the complementary
concept of emanation (aporroia). If the concept of process aims at establishing the ontological
chain which originates in the One in order to arrive at the sensible world, the concept of
emanation purposes to set forth the conditions of that procession in explaining why the existence
of inferior degrees of being is necessary. The idea of emanation must respond to the exigencies of
the transcendence of the One which we have already enumerated: emanation must not imply
any action, any volition from the One. The procession must at the same time come forth by

The concept of “seminal Reason” went through an evolution in Christian philosophy through the
influence of Augustine. In the 17th century, Roger Bacon defined the seminal reasons in the following
manner: Seminal reason is the incomplete essence of matter in such measure as it tends towards its
culmination, hence the seed tends to become a tree.” (Communia naturalium, edited by Robert Steele,
Oxford, Liber Primus, p. 84) For Augustine, the seminal reasons or seminal virtues are the germs which
God has deposited in matter and which are at the origin of the substantial forms which constitute the
principle of individuation, which makes the individual emerge from indeterminate matter.
E. Brehier, “La Philosophie de Plotin”, p. 35.

nature from the One519, be spontaneous without affecting the source, without weakening or

diminishing it in any way.

Plotinus find the paradigmatic scheme of procession in the image of the light which emanates from the sun520, which was suggested to him by a passage of Plato, in which this latter one compares the Good and the Sun, or another of Phedon which speaks of the cold and the hot.521 Plotinus finds many images to explain to us the nature of emanation: emanation is like the lines which come from the center of the circle in order to engender it [the circle]; it is like the light which emanates from the sun, the heat of the flame, the cold of snow or of ice, the odor of perfume, the stream that flows from the spring; the life that projects the roots of a great tree. We see thus that the concept of emanation not only aims at explaining the ontological relation between the hypostases, but that it has a paradigmatic value which seems to be born of the direct observation of the phenomena of nature, and which thus poses itself as a universal law.

In a general manner, the Plotinian scheme of the procession and emanation convey a certain pessimism, for the various hypostases correspond to a degradation of being from the One to the sensible world. This deployment is hence also a fall. Between simple deployment and the fall, the thought of Plotinus always hesitates, as did Plato, for he himself saw in matter the limit to order.
Plotinus was influenced by the pessimism of the Hellenistic world, by its ascetic and stoic tendencies, its fear of pleasure and of delight. Porphyry wrote about Plotinus: “He seems to have been ashamed of being in a body.”522 This rejection of the body and of delight would be one of the principal tendencies which the Hellenistic world would transmit to Christianity, and for which we unjustly hold the latter responsible. Plotinus presents matter as a “mire” in which the individual soul imprisoned in the prison of the body would be irremediably sullied. But the problem of the fall is surmounted by the desire for ascension. Each hypostasis aspires, through a kind of nostalgia, to lose itself in the contemplation of they superior hypostasis. In this way, the individual soul aspires to return to the universal soul. In order to accomplish

this, he must detach himself from matter in stripping off its qualities in order to attempt, through a personal effort, to rediscover the memory of his original being, the traces of which subsist in the depths of his interior being. This ascension is a return to oneself. Its aim is to rediscover the original purity (archaia katastasis) through this spiritual purification. This process results in the loss of individuality through the suppression of all the determinations of the soul, in order to attain thus the state of contemplative union which is, not a symbiosis, but an unveiling of intelligible realities, and through them, of the true being.

We will conclude this exposition of the ideas of Plotinus with this citation from Brehier, which admirably summarizes the position of that philosopher:

"What there was new (in Plotinus) was not the letter, but the spirit; it was to abolish

Enneads, VI.8,7,50 and VI.8,8,15.
Ibid., V.1,6.
Plato, Phaedo, III, translated by E. Chambry (into French), ed. Garnier Flamarion, 1965, pp. 163-164.
Translator's Note: Porphyry, On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books, first sentence:http://www.loebclassics.com/view/porphyry-life_plotinus_order_his_books/1969/pb_LCL440.3.xml?rskey=YKwQBF&result=1

eternal realities as fixed objects, the [Platonic] Ideas, or, more or less, to make of them, to the astonishment of Porphyry, entering in the school, modes or ways of being of Intelligence, and not things; it was to enable the individual subject itself to enter into the intelligible world, with concrete richness and the infinity of all its determinations; it was, finally, to consider them hypostases themselves, and not as things, but as spiritual attitudes."523

Plotinus had numerous successors among the most important we can cite Porphyry, Iamblicus, Proclus and Damacius. But the innovative contribution of these philosophers is of little importance. In the 5th and 6th century, Neoplatonism even entered into a certain decadence to

the extent that, under the influence of Iamblicus, theurgy had an increasing influence and in
which the intermediary hypostases were multiplied by the philosophers.524

From that time onwards, Neoplatonism continued only as a sort of auxiliary doctrine in
Christianity and in Islam, and thus became the lingua franca of the Mediterranean and
European world until its overturning accomplished by Thomas [Aquinas] in favor of
Aristotelianism. Averroes [Ibn Rushd] tried to bring about a similar operation in the Islamic
world, without however succeeding in doing so.

In the Eastern Christian world, very early on the Fathers of the Church, Clement of
Alexandria525 and Dennis the Areopagite526 in particular, adopted Neoplatonism as the medium
to express and transmit the Christian doctrine.

This adaptation was not without problems and was impacted by the Origenist crisis of the 4th
century, which was surmounted through the contributions of Gregory of Nyassa, Basil of
Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianze. From that time on, we can admit that the Church had
surpassed the principal incompatibilities between Neoplatonism and the message of the
Gospel.527 It was not the same with Islam, which did not have the same concern for doctrinal
purity. Especially after Avicenna [Ibn Sina], the Neoplatonic doctrines invaded theology and
metaphysics to such an extent that they profoundly altered the doctrinal bases of the Qur'an.

Two works played an essential role: the “Pseudo-Theology of Aristotle” and the “Book of
Causes”.

Brehier, op. cit., p. 182.
It is interesting to note that, with the exception of Appolonius of Tyana, at the same time a myth and a
common ground of Islamic culture, Baha'u'llah refuses to take into consideration the philosophers
subsequent to Plotinus, as if after him none was worthy of being mentioned.
“Le Platonisme des Peres de l'Eglise”.
Rene Rocque, “L'Univers dyonisien, Structures hierarchiques du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys”,
Paris, 1983.

Endre von Ivanka, “Plato Christianus; la reception critique du platonisme chez les Peres de l'Eglise”,
trad. E. Kessler, Paris, 1990.

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8. The Pseudo-Theology of Aristotle

We know the “Pseudo-Theology of Aristotle”528 in two manuscript versions in Arabic and a
Latin version translated from the Arabic version. The work was translated by 'Abd al-Masih al-
Himsi and was collected by the philosopher al-Kindi529. The history of the manuscript is very
complex, for even though we have known for a long time that it was not the work of Aristotle, it
is only recently that we have been able to demonstrate that the text is based upon a paraphrase of
the Enneads IV, V and VI, of Plotinus.

The influence of this work was immense, for it was considered the epitome of wisdom and of
Greek sagacity, and it served as the basis of the philosophy of al-Farabi, as also that of Ibn Sina.
Certain authors were conscious of the differences between the thought of “Pseudo-Theology”
and the rest of the works of Aristotle, but the work of al-Farabi was precisely to harmonize the
two philosophies in order to present the result as “the true philosophy of Aristotle”. [We should
also] say that the Aristotle of the Muslim world is far removed from the one known to the
Western world, very platonic, even in Ibn Rushd, who nonetheless tried to take the opposite path
in order to discover the authentic Aristotle.

“Pseudo-Theology” is essentially a treatise on emanation of which it lengthily explains the
principle. The text of the Enneads was touched up on numerous points. It was intermixed in
passages with Proclus, or at least with proclusian doctrinal elements, and reorganized in order to
be presented in a more systematic manner than the original. Its doctrine sometimes departs
substantially from that of Plotinus and in certain passages evinces Christian influences.

At the summit of the procession is found the divine Nature which is the first Cause, or the Cause
of causes, absolutely transcendent, without movement and outside of the Aeon

(dahr). But the
divine Nature is the Instigator (mubdi') of the world through the luminous power which emanates
from itself. It is this luminous power which engenders Intelligence. The divine Nature then
employs Intelligence in order to radiate upon the Soul, the Soul to radiate upon Nature, and
Nature to radiate upon all things destined to generation and to corruption.

The Soul is itself an image of Intelligence, under the form of Desire, which constitutes in itself a
kind of movement which animates and which represents its active nature, for thus moves from
high to low, directed by Intelligence, and penetrates all beings, giving to each its own spirit. The
Desire can take two orientations—that of the universal and it is thus by this desire that the Soul
governs the world of forms; or that of the particular, and it is thus that the Soul governs the world
of particular beings.

In penetrating the beings, the Soul fragments and divides itself into an animal, [an] appetitive,
[and an] irascible, and [a] cognitive soul. Notwithstanding, this divisibility of the Soul constitutes
an accident resulting from the union of the Soul and the body. The text [of "Pseudo-Theology"]
presents the Soul as being the origin of distinction between the sensible world and the intelligible

528Henceforth "Pseudo-Theology".
A. Badawi, La transmission de la philosophie grecque au monde arabe, Paris, 1987, pp. 100-101. Also see:
Badawi, Plotinus apud Arabes, pp. 1-164; and Kraus, "Plotin chez les arabes," Bulletin de l'Institut d'Egypte, 23
(1941).

world, and attributes this distinction to Plato. Thus, if the Soul knows all through connaturality,
the particular beings can elevate themselves to knowledge of the intelligible world by uniting
themselves to the universal Soul. The intelligible world is the location of the forms which are the
prototypes of all sensible beings and, at the same time, a world of perfection and harmony. Only
the Soul possesses movement, and this for the reason that it is an effect of effect. It is by this

movement that the sensible world is born, which is like an image of the intelligible world. But the
Soul is fated to a certain degeneration, because in order to produce the interior beings it must
lower its glance upon the world of Nature, and thus, it descends the degrees of being to the
human soul, the animal soul and the vegetable soul.

9. The Book of Causes

The “Book of Causes” knew a derivation fairly similar to that of “Pseudo-Theology”. The book
must have been composed before the Fihrist [bibliography] of Ibn Nadim, that is before 987
[C.E.], by a late disciple of Proclus; it was later translated into Arabic, perhaps by the great
translator Ishaq ibn Hunayn.530 In fact, the “Book of Causes” is a sort of Compendium taken
from the “Elements of Theology” of Proclus, but attributed subsequently to Aristotle. The Latin
version was itself translated from Arabic, as is attested by numerous words left in this language.
This text had a great influence upon Ibn Sina, and became in a certain sense canonical for
Islamic thought.

The “Book of Causes” thus represents the thought of Proclus, which is distinct from that of
Plotinus. Proclus multiplies the hypostases in order to avoid any repetition in his system, which
gives it a very high degree of complexity. The whole is organized around the notion of orders
conceived as emanating each one from the One by a process which effects that the One
determines itself in each one of them. To the Plotinian triad, Proclus substitutes a tetrad which
includes the One, Existence, Intelligence and the Soul. Furthermore, parallel to the fundamental
tetrad, he multiplies the parallel triads to exhaust all of the virtualities of Being in a highly
hierarchied universe. It is well understood that the link which Proclus established between his
metaphysics and the pagan gods through the system of the Henads disappears in the Arabic
version, which explains many of the distortions in the “Book of Causes” in relation to the true
doctrine of Proclus.

The process of the translation of the Greek works began in the 8th century and

was expanded in
the following century with the great translators al-Bitriq and Hunayn ibn Ishaq. The first
important thinker to have exploited these materials was al-Kindi. The assimilation of
Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism by al-Farabi was measured and prudent. He constrained
himself to remain always within the framework of orthodoxy and does not hesitate when
necessary to set himself apart from Aristotle. Al-Farabi was nevertheless the first to adapt in
Arabic a portion of the Neoplatonic vocabulary and its concepts.

Our aim here not being to write the history of Islamic philosophy but only to follow the great
steps in the introduction of Neoplatonism, we will restrict ourselves to summarizing the positions
of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina upon the exact points which occupy us; for with Ibn Sina we can
Badawi, op. cit., pp. 60-73.

consider that the system is definitively formed. The developments which follow him are nothing
more than minor variations.

10. Al-Kindi

The philosophy of al-Kindi is difficult to access and still little known.531 His work has only
partially come down to us, and we do not have access to a systematic exposition, but to a series of
little treatises, sometimes contradictory, which must have been inserted in an oral teaching
destined for a small group of disciples already well aware of the large lines of their master's
philosophy.

For al-Kindi, God is “producer” (muhdith) of the world. By this title, He can be considered the
first Principle of all things and can be called the Eternal, or the True One [True-One]. The True
One is the cause of Himself. That is then the necessary Being, not the cause beyond all categories
of thought because it is the first category, the first principle from which we think [of] all the
principles. It is beyond time, movement and space. Notwithstanding his knowledge of the “Book
of Causes”, al-Kindi does not seem to have been seduced by the emanationist

philosophy. The reason is that this emanationist conception seemed to him to be incompatible with the concept of creation ex nihilo such as we find in the Qur'an. In order to resolve this difficult point he had recourse, like other thinkers of his generation, to the treatises of the Christian theologian John Philopon of Alexandria, who had written a systematic refutation of the Hellenistic theses on the eternity of the world.532

11. Al-Farabi

The first Muslim philosopher who can be called Neoplatonic is al-Farabi. He had an ample knowledge of the collection of Arabic translations of Greek works, and the contradictions between Plato and Aristotle had not escaped his notice. However, he dreamed of a synthesis which would unite the two philosophies and drew up for this purpose, a "reconciliation of the two sages" in which the Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and Neoplatonic positions are imbricated in order to effectively constitute a fairly coherent whole.533 Perhaps al-Farabi succeeded in realizing this synthesis which the ancient world had sought for in vain. Nevertheless, it is the Neoplatonic theses, without doubt because they are more eclectic, which dominate in him.534

The work of al-Kindi was published in Cairo under the title Rasa'il al-Kindi al-Falsafa (two volumes, 2nd edition 1978). His metaphysic was translated into English by A.I. Ivy and published with an interesting commentary under the title Al-Kindi's Metaphysics (Albany, 1974).
"John Philoponus as a source of medieval Islamic proofs of creation," in Journal of American Oriental Sociology, volume 89, 1969, pp. 357-391.
Al-Farabi, Deux traites philosophiques: L'harmonie entre les opinions des deux sages, le divin Platon et Aristote, et le De la Religion, introduction, translation and notes by Dominique Mallet, Damascus, 1989.
For a more complete exposition of the philosophy of al-Farabi we can consult Ibrahim Madkour, La place d'al-Farabi dans la philosophie musulmane, Paris, 1934.

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In his principal book, "The Opinions of the Inhabitants of the ideal City"535, which is inspired by

“The Republic” of Plato, al-Farabi expounds some of his metaphysical concepts. He begins by identifying God as the first Being in a clearly Proclusian tradition.536 And, this first Being is none other than the eternal One and the first Cause537, the indivisible and totally undefinable substance.538 Up until here, al-Farabi is very close to al-Kindi, with the difference that his description of the first Being follows much more closely “Pseudo-Theology” and the “Book of Causes” than the Qur'an. The One is the Living and Life539, it is Beauty and Perfection540, Truth and Reality541. Totally self-subsisting, the universe emanates from Him through a necessity which, nevertheless, adds nothing to His perfection. This emanation is an overflowing of being— which is superabundant in God. This superabundance is engendered by the only activity possible to God, the contemplation of Himself, which permits Him to make Himself the object of intellection and to conceive of an essence without intermediary. For the One is, at the same time, Intelligence ('aql), Intelligible (ma'qul) and Intelligent ('aqil).542 By His substance, He is Intellect in action543. By Intellect in action we must understand a pure Intelligence which is a form (sura) stripped of all matter, for matter is an obstacle to the act of intelligibility, that is to say, of contemplation544, even as the One is an Intelligible by its substance, as an Intelligible is also a substance stripped of all matter.545 Finally, it is in contemplating its own substance that the One becomes Intelligent and Intelligence in action (bi'l-fi'l)546. From this thinking activity is thus

Al-Farabi, Traite des opinions des habitants de la cite ideale, introduction, translation and notes by Tahani Sabri, Paris, 1990. We refer to this translation by the abbreviation “City”. There exist several editions of the Arabic text. The edition to which we referred is that of Dr. A. Nasir Nadir, Kitab Ardi Ahl al-Madinat al-Fadila, Beirut, 1973. We cite this edition under the abbreviation “Madina”.

The expression used is al-Awwal, which is to say, “the First”, and more rarely “al-Wahid”. Cf. Cite, p. 43 and Madina, p. 38. In order to conserve a coherent vocabulary, and to better place in evidence the

continuity of thought from Plotinus until Ibn Sina, we prefer to translate al-Awwal by “the One”.
City, pp. 43-44.
City, p. 49 and Madina, p. 44.
Al-Hayy and al-Hayawa. City, p. 52 and Madina, p. 48.
City, p. 53 and Madina, p. 50.
Al-Haqq and al-Haqiqa. Al-Farabi defines reality (haqiqa) as the existence of that which pertains to a
thing. God is thus reality because He is the first Being and that in Him Being is confounded with
essence. We must not confuse this definition of haqiqa with that which is utilized by Bahá’u’lláh. The
definition of al-Farabi is, at the same time, ontological and logical because reality is returned to the
Being and not to the essence. In the framework of the metaphysic of Bahá’u’lláh, haqiqa is a reality of
spiritual nature and not substantial.
City, p. 50 and Madina, p. 48.
Madina, p. 46; “Fa-innahu bi-jawharihi 'aqlun bi'l-fi'l…”
Here we have translated the verb 'aqala by “contemplate” instead of “intellectualize” as does Tahani
Sabri, and this in order to maintain a unity of vocabulary throughout the length of this chapter. The act
of intellectualizing in the sense of al-Farabi and of Ibn Sina is furthermore not altogether equivalent to
Plotinian contemplation.
City, p. 50 and Madina, p. 47: “Wa huwa idan ma'qulun bi jawharihi…”
Madina, p. 47: “Bal huwa bi-nafsihi ya'qilu dhatahu fa yasiru bima ya'qilu min dhatihi 'aqilan wa 'aqlan bi'l-fi'l”.
This passage is in its totality less than clear in its construction and in its implications even as the concern
for symmetry is evident and the chain of logic. Al-Farabi adds thereafter this final proposition: “but also

engendered the first separated Intelligence.

From this point onwards, al-Farabi innovates in relation to Plotinus and Proclus. In appearance,
he returns to the first idea of Plato, which tied movement to a soul and thus associated a soul to
each star. Al-Farabi fusions the collection of the attributes of the Soul and of Intelligence which
correspond to the ten cosmic spheres in order to constitute the second Beings or separated
Intelligences. Each Intelligence has two forms of possible activity: the contemplation of the

essence of the One, and the contemplation of itself. In entering into the contemplation of itself,
the first separated Intelligence engenders the first heaven, and in contemplating the One it
engenders the third Intelligence, which in its turn engenders the sphere of the fixed stars and the
fourth Intelligence, and continuing thus to the tenth Intelligence which engendered the Moon.547
Thus we find ten separated Intelligences, nine celestial bodies and eleven heavens.

The model of al-Farabi has the advantage of linking together, through Intelligence, the
metaphysical, cosmological and epistemological aspects, which effectively results in a more global
model than that of Plotinus.

To the perfection of the intelligible world, al-Farabi opposes the imperfection of the sensible
world, subject to the disorganized movements of combinations and of disintegrations of elements
under the influence of the celestial bodies. At the heart of the disorder of matter gradually
emerges, under the influence of the stars and of their Intelligence, an order which progressively
moves towards a greater perfection, culminating in man. Man, through his rational faculties,
manifests certain qualities of the intelligible world. His soul has the capacity to elevate itself to the
intelligible realities and to know them, which constitutes in actuality the purpose of human
existence, for the descending process of the procession corresponds to an ascending noetic
process.

12. Ibn Sina

Avicenna (Ibn Sina) wished to summarize at the same time his thought and all the philosophy of
his time, of which he considered himself the culmination, in his great encylopedic work, the
“Book of Healing” (Shifa).548 We will limit ourselves to recalling here his theses concerning the
metaphysical structure of the world.549

The metaphysic of Ibn Sina much resembles that of al-Farabi. He himself writes that in his

as His essence intellectualizes, He becomes intelligible in action.” We have here the embryo of the Avicennian

system.
City, X, p. 61 and Madina, p. 62.
We refer to the translation of Georges Anawati, La metaphysique du Shifa, two volumes, Paris, volume I,
1978 and volume II, 1985. We also refer to the Danish-Namih which is a Persian summary of the Shifa
and which was translated under the title Le livre de la science by Mohammed Achena and Henri Masse (2nd
edition, Paris, 1986). We cite the translation of Anawati under the abbreviation “Shifa”.
We here employ the word metaphysic, conforming to Western usage, in a very different sense than the
Avicennian sense. For Ibn Sina, metaphysics (ilahiyyat) uniquely treats the separated entities of matter. Its
subject is existence of that kind (Shifa, volume I, p. 93).

youth, he read The Theology, which ever being able to understand it, until the day in which he
read the commentaries of al-Farabi which brought to him a true revelation. The thought of Ibn
Sina will then inscribe itself in the straight line of philosophies of emanation built upon
Aristotelian-ptolemaic cosmological premises linked to a Neoplatonic ontology.550

Like al-Kindi, Ibn Sina identifies God with the necessary Being551 which has no cause and which
is Perfection, pure Good and Intelligence.552 In Him, the essence and existence are
confounded.553 The perfection of the necessary Being manifests itself in the fact that it is pure
intellect. The necessary Being in recognizing Himself in an act of knowledge, grasps at the same
time all that emanates from Him and hence the procession of all beings. In contrast to al-Farabi,
it is thus, in Ibn Sina, the entire creation which emanates directly from the necessary Being,
which reinstates a perspective which is more compatible with the Qur'an. We can nevertheless
ask whether it is a necessity of the system or an accomodation destined to satisfy orthodoxy.
Whichever [the case may be], Ibn Sina endeavors to render compatible the Qur'anic exigencies
of a creation directly engendered by God and in contact with Him, with the maintenance of the
procession of a series of hypostases. Hence, as in al-Farabi, the necessary

Being engenders by
emanation a first Intelligence which is responsible for the movement of the utmost sphere. The
first Intelligence in contemplating itself as necessary engenders the Soul of the utmost heaven. In
contemplating itself as contingent, it engenders the Body of this heaven of which the Soul, by the
movement of its desire for the Intelligence from which it emanates, will become the motor. From
the contemplation of the first Intelligence by the necessary Being, this one engenders the second
Intelligence. Thus, the process reproduces itself through reiteration until the tenth Intelligence.554

Only the instrumental Intelligence (al-'aql al-fa'al) is in contact with this world. It is this which is at
the origin of the Imaginal World in giving forms to matter. Ibn Sina was however very critical
towards the platonic theory of ideas. He conceived of the platonic ideas as universals or collective
kinds subsisting in a totally independent manner and representing the prototypes of individual
beings and of sensible realities. Ibn Sina adopted a position fairly close to nominalism and
affirmed that it is only through abstraction of particulars that the human spirit reconstitutes kinds
and species such as all the categories of the universal. These universals cannot thus exist
independently from the individuals who composed them. “Furthermore,” Majid Fakhry explains,
“when we attribute unity to the universal, we do not mean that it resides in action in all the
particular beings which participate therein, but rather that there is an inherent potentiality to be
in numerous substrata disposed to receive it; all the while remaining numerically unitary, it is

The works on the metaphysic of Ibn Sina are innumerable. We will limit ourselves to citing here:
Djemil Saliba, Etudes sur la metaphysique d'Avicenne, Paris, 1926; Parviz Morewedge, The metaphysica of
Avicenna, London, 1973; Louis Gardet, La pensee religieuse d'Avicenne, Paris, 1951; and the Arabic work of
Shaykh al-Ard, Al-Mudkhul ila Falsafati Ibn Sina, Cairo.
Shifa, I, p. 113.
Shifa, VIII, Chapter VI.
Shifa, VIII, Chapter IV, volume II, p. 80. Ibn Sina writes: “necessary Being is the first”, and “There is no

distinction in Him between quiddity (mahiyya) and existence for there is not quiddity other than His Being in itself
(anniyya)". Cf. Livre des Sciences, p. 198.
Shifa, IX, Chapter II, volume II, p. 126 on the process of emanation; and Ibid., p. 135 on the
engenderment of the celestial spheres.

thus multiple in power."555

We consider the critique as fundamental. All the post-Avicennian thinkers have attempted to
respond to this. The construction of the Imaginal World and of Malakut in the Ishraqi
philosophers would attempt to take stock of many of these points. The modern neo-Avicennians,
particularly those of the school of Henri Corbin, would do well to meditate upon these positions
of Ibn Sina when they attack nominalism or when they make it responsible for the decline of
theosophy, as in the case of Faivre. Not all theosophy is necessarily platonic.

Nevertheless, Ibn Sina maintained the Aristotelian concept of form, and he makes this concession
to Neoplatonism, that the form must preexist matter and that its origin must thus be found in the
instrumental Intelligence.556

With Ibn Sina, we can consider that this part of Muslim metaphysics has come to its culmination.
It general economy was never challenged before the end of the 19th century. Of course,
numerous philosophers attempted to construct their own systems, but in doing so, they remained
always dependent upon him. Their relation to Ibn Sina resembles that of Proclus, Sirianius or
Simplicius to Plotinus. Even if the Ishraqiyyun introduced numerous refinements, the metaphysic
of Ibn Sina, eventually mixed in with some elements borrowed from Ibn al-'Arabi, is that which
totally dominated the epoch of Baha'u'llah. We cannot comprehend the originality of his
message if we do not ceasingly remind ourselves of this fact.

We will not return here to Ishraqi or Shaykhi metaphysics, considering that we have treated this
question sufficiently in the chapter consecrated to the divine Worlds in the Islamic tradition. In
Iran, the ideas of Ibn Sina still remained very much living until the 19th

century, which is not the
case in the Arab world. However, these ideas were influenced by the
illuminative theology of
Suhrawardi, and notably his angelology and sustained an inflection suitable to
Shi'ism. Because
of this, the cosmological aspect became less important, and the discussions
were concentrated
upon ontological questions and notably upon the status and the function of the
Imaginal World.

Having thus defined the Neoplatonic framework of Muslim philosophy, this will
permit us to
make a rigorous comparison thereof with the thought of Baha'u'llah, to
determine points of
contact, to grasp the axis of divergencies and to cease the force and the
originality of this thought
beyond a language which can sometimes seem conventional and which often hides
great
audacities. Such a picture, in order to be complete, should include also a
comparison with Sufi
thought, notably that of Ibn al-'Arabi, and the authors of existential monism.
For practical
reasons, we have however preferred to provisionally limit our study. But the
reader may be
assured that the result will be quite similar, and that he will find in the
writings of Baha'u'llah a
multitude of borrowings of vocabulary and images, of common themes, but finally
of serious
divergencies upon fundamentals. In the work of Baha'u'llah, in which form
plays such an
important role, it is always necessary to reside a text in its most general
context and not to
content oneself with a superficial reading, for we can be sure that every word
has its weight.
Majid Fakhry, Histoire de la philosophie islamique, trad. Marwan Nasr, Paris,
1989, p. 174.
Shifa, II, Chapter V, volume I, p. 80. For Ibn Sina matter remains always the
principle of individuation
(Shifa, IC, Chapter IV, volume II, p. 139). See Osmane Chahine, Ontologie et
Theologie chez Avicenne, Paris,
1961, pp. 61-65.

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13. Baha'u'llah and Hellenistic philosophy

The following chapter will be consecrated to a comparison of the teaching of
Baha'u'llah with
the doctrine of Neoplatonism which will show that despite certain appearances

the philosophy of
Baha'u'llah has nothing Neoplatonic about it. This brings us to extend our search to a larger
framework which is that of Hellenistic philosophy (Falsafa) in general.

Al-Ghazali in "Annihilation of the philosophers" (Tahafut al-Falasifa) examined twenty theses of
Falsafa. which he adjudged to be incompatible with Muslim orthodoxy. Notwithstanding all of
the contradictions of Averroes (Ibn Rushd), al-Ghazali certainly had good reason to underline that
Hellenistic philosophy was, in its Greek form, unassimilatable by Islam, and that all the efforts of
adaptation which one could make would have no consequence other than to deform the one or
the other. According to al-Ghazali, Falsafa resulted in three theses striking in their impiety (kufr).
The first was regarding the eternity of the world, the second upon the negation of the
resurrection and the third upon the limited knowledge which God had of particulars.

The first statement which could be made is that if the philosophers had be confronted not by the
Qur'an, but with the work of Baha'u'llah, most of the objections of al-Ghazali would not have
existed. In annulling the dogma of the ex nihilo creation and that of the resurrection, Baha'u'llah
transcended all of the obstacles which are opposed to an harmonious synthesis between
philosophy and religious thought. Also, his theology and his psychology resolve the contradictions
in which al-Farabi and Ibn Sina had fallen in order to try to explain why a God which could
have no knowledge except of universals could remain an omniscient God. Baha'u'llah resolves
the problem this time in turning his back on the philosophy of necessity in which Falsafa was
enclosed, in order to affirm the total transcendence of God, in a very Cartesian sense, and his
total independence with regard to the world of contingencies. Let us note as well that this attitude
was the only which could have liberated scientific investigation from the constraints of theological
dogmatism.

In a general manner, one could thus conclude that there is a certain kinship between the

philosophical approach of Falsafa and the thought of Baha'u'llah. If this kinship exists, it should be sought not in the theses of Falsafa, but more appropriately in its spirit, which is perhaps the spirit of the first Greek philosophers; for otherwise Baha'u'llah differs from that which was the foundation of its teaching. For there is incompatibility between the teaching of Baha'u'llah and that of Falsafa on at least two fundamental points, that of cosmology and that of ontology.

Upon the cosmological plan, Baha'u'llah undoes the work of al-Farabi and of Ibn Sina. He rejects the system of Ptolemy upon which it was founded, and all the system of the procession of intelligences and of the motive souls of the heavens. In doing so, he once more separates ontology, cosmology and psychology, which had been abusively associated and unified. This categorical rejection of the Avicennian onto-cosmology which impregnated all Muslim and Persian thought until his epoch, is an act of great courage but which brings down the entire edifice of Muslim physics and metaphysics. This is a revolution the amplitude of which we today have difficulty appreciating. It is not only the system of Avicenna which is at stake, but also that of Ibn al-'Arabi and of Suhrawardi. In this sense, Baha'u'llah anticipated the Western scientific revolution which, introduced into Persia some decades later, was to ruin the cosmological bases of theology.

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The consequences of this abandonment are immense. They imply the disappearance of Avicennian and Suhrawardian angelology about which we have already had occasion to explain. It implies also the disappearance of prophetology such as it was conceived by the philosophers. Let us remember that Ibn Sina and Suhrawardi identified Gabriel, the angel of revelation, with the instrumental Intellect. Thus the whole relation of the prophet to God, his mode of knowing revelation which must be rethought.

On the ontological plan, Baha'u'llah rejects the eclectic ontology crafted on the basis of Plato and

Aristotle by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Two aspects of this ontology are aimed at. The first refers to the supremacy of Being in the whole of the system, and its relation to the philosophy of essences. The second concerns Aristotelian dualism, of form and matter, which is totally abandoned.

Baha'u'llah seems to implicitly consider that the derailing of traditional ontology has occurred ever since the first attempts of the synthesis of al-Kindi, when he assimilated God to the necessary Being, implying thereby a dualism between necessary Being and possible Being, from which al-Farabi was to derive his secondary beings which are the separated Intelligences. There is a problem with this already perceived by Plotinus, who refused to assimilate Being to the One and who considered that Being must proceed from the One and not be confused with It. For Baha'u'llah as well, Being is a strictly contingent notion, which prohibits its confusion with God. This ruins, it is well understood, all the speculations of Ibn Sina and of Thomas Aquinas on the distinction between Being and Essence in the contingent creatures and their coincidence in God. The ontology of Baha'u'llah is neither a philosophy of essence, nor a philosophy of existence; it is a philosophy of reality (haqiqat), in which reality is considered a spiritual nature without substance admitting diverse modalities of being.

Baha'u'llah also abandons the Aristotelian distinction between form and matter. Ibn Sina had suggested that form can exist independently of matter in constituting a substance apart [from it]. Thus the separated Intelligences were pure forms. Thomas Aquinas adopted this point of view in order to make of the human soul the form of the body. For Baha'u'llah, spiritual realities (haqa'iq) are not substantial realities. Thus they cannot have a form. From this radiates an entirely new plan from that of Muslim physics and metaphysics, for from this duality of form and matter, doubled by the duality of being and essence, was derived a whole collection of principles and consequences upon the nature of intelligible and sensible realities. For Aristotle, everything that was not matter was intelligible, which results in confusing all the modalities

of being. For if, for
example, thought is an intelligible, thought is then of a different nature from the soul.
Furthermore, Ibn Sina created of matter the principle of the individuation of being. This
problem of individuation, which so troubled medieval philosophy, was made inevitable if one
admitted that the kind and the species preceded the individual in the order of existence, which
seemed to be necessary if one wished to make the Aristotelian form or the platonic idea
preexistent. In the ontology of Baha'u'llah, these questions no longer have much meaning,
because the kinds and species disappear as universals. Baha'u'llah is not far from the metaphysic
of Duns Scot and the nominalist theses of William of Ockham. It would nevertheless be absurd to
make him a nominalist inasmuch as his ontology is based upon a concept of essence and
existence which is altogether different. Nevertheless there is a totally unexplored domain there
which should be seriously studied one day and which promises to be very fruitful philosophically,
for we are convinced that a renaissance of modern philosophy must pass through a complete

reformulation of ontology outside of the Aristotelian or platonic categories.

We could without doubt enumerate many other points upon which the teaching of Baha'u'llah
diverges from the Falsafa, but these other points seem entirely secondary to us in comparison to
the two fundamental questions of cosmology and ontology which we have evoked here. This
done, not only has Baha'u'llah abrogated the chasm of several centuries which seemed to have
separated Eastern philosophy from Western philosophy; he returned philosophy to the domain of
ideas so as to leave the field free to science in order to explain the sensible universe outside of all
metaphysics, and He opened to philosophical investigation avenues about which 20th century
philosophy had an intuition, notably on the relative and progressive intelligibility of reality and
the relation between language, reality and psychological interiority, and others as well. These

paths are still far from being explored.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:
THE EMANATIONIST METAPHYSIC OF BAHA'U'LLAH

1. The divine Verb as Being

In the Lawh-i-Hikmat, Baha'u'llah explains that God has not directly created the world, but that he did so through the Holy Spirit, or more exactly, the divine Verb (kalama)[kalimati'llah] "which is the Cause of the entire creation"557, what he calls, in other Tablets, "the Primal Will" (al-mashiyyat al-awwaliyya). Baha'u'llah follows this declaration with the following commentary:

"Know thou, moreover, that the Word of God [kala:ma'llah]—exalted be His glory—is higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive, for it is sanctified from any property (literally: nature, tabi'a) or substance (jawhar). It transcendeth the limitations of known elements ('unasir) and is exalted above all the essential and recognized substances (ustuqusat). It became manifest without any syllable or sound and is none but the Command (amr) of God which pervadeth all created things [al-muhaymini 'ala'l-'alami:n]. It hath never been withheld from the world of being ('a:lam). It is God's all-pervasive grace558, from which all grace doth emanate559. It is an entity (kawn) far removed above all that hath been and shall be."560

This passage thus situates the Holy Spirit as the first engendered. Baha'u'llah says elsewhere that "It is an entity", which can also be translated as "It is the Being (Kawn) sanctified from all that was and

TB:140
We would prefer to translate it as "the emanation of God".
Ibid.
TB:140-141

all that will be".561 It is in way the Being which preceded existence and hence that which confers being upon all the entities of creation. At the same time, it is the "Command of God" (amru'llah), which is to say, the expression of the divine Will and the transmitter of Its

designs, for the Command
of God aims at establishing an order in the cosmos which results that the
universe is the expression
of this divine Will.

2. The Baha'i concept of emanation

In "Some Answered Questions", 'Abdu'l-Baha developed certain ideas
regarding the Holy Spirit
which take up the terms employed by Baha'u'llah. He declares: "The Holy
Spirit is the Bounty of
God (fayd-i-ilahi) and the luminous rays which emanate from the
Manifestations…"562

We must question the meaning of the word "fayd" (pronouned "feiz" in
Persian), which is translated
into French by Hippolyte Dreyfus as "bonte" and by Laura Clifford Barney by
"bounty". "Fayd"
generally has the meaning of "grace", which is fairly close to the English
"bounty" but fairly
different from the French "bonte". Should we thus understand that the
phrase should have been
translated as: "The Holy Spirit is a divine grace"? In appearance, the
translation of Taherzadeh of
the passage from the "Tablet of Wisdom" cited above seems to make
reasonable this hypothesis
because we read: "It is God's all-pervasive grace [huwa'l-faydu'l-a'Zamu],
from which all grace doth
emanate [al-ladhi: ka:na 'illaTa'l-fuyu:Za:ti]."563 Here the word "fayd"
is translated by "grace". There is
however another possibility in translation. If "grace" is the current
meaning of the word "fayd" in
Persian, it is not the same in Arabic. Most of the Arabic dictionaries ignore
"fayd" in the sense of
"grace". The word comes from the root FYD which signifies "to
overflow", "to inundate", "to flow"
and "to emanate". In Arabic, "fayd" is the vehicle of the idea of
abundance and of overflow, and it is
because of this that the first Arab translators used it to translate the Greek
"emanation" and the
word has always kept this meaning in the philosophical language, no doubt under
a proclusian
influence which must go back to the "Book of Causes", for we know that
Proclus conceived of the
first emanation as an overflowing of Being beyond the One. Thus we can
translate the phrase of
'Abdu'l-Baha in the following manner: "The Holy Spirit is an emanation
from God." Let us

recognize that the phrase translated in this way has a much more limpid meaning than if we use the
words “bounty” or “grace”. Furthermore, this translation has the advantage such as we will see, of
remaining coherent with the text that follows as well as with the whole of the philosophy of
Baha’u’llah.

But if we decide to translate “fayd” by emanation, that is equally valid for the already mentioned
passage of the “Tablet of Wisdom”:

In Arabic: “wa huwa al-kawnu'l-muqadasu 'amma kana wa ma yakun”; cf. Majmu'iy-i-Matbu'iy-i-Alwah-i-
Mubarakih, p. 41. It is difficult to determine if kawn should be translated by “being” or by “having been”.
Certain ones could be tempted to see in this kawn the esse of Western metaphysics. The two readings seem to
be possible upon a purely semantic ground, but to see in this kawn the esse of the [Western] metaphysical
tradition does not seem to conform to the thought of Baha'u'llah.
SAQ:XXV:124
In Arabic: “wa huwa al-faydu'l-a'Zamu'ladhi kana 'illata'l-fuyudat”; cf. Majmu'iy-i-Matbu'iy-i-Alwah-i-Mubarakih, p.
41.

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“It [the Word of God] is the greatest emanation which is the cause of the other
emanations.”564

Of course, it is not through a simple error that Taherzadeh translated “fayd” by “grace”. It seems
that he has relied upon the example of the translations of Shoghi Effendi, who often considered that
it was not always necessary to enter into all the subtleties of philosophical vocabulary and who
himself confessed the impossibility of rendering into English the richness of the metaphysical
terminology of Baha’u’llah. Nevertheless, conscious of the problem, Taherzadeh wished to correct
an inevitable semantic slide by reintroducing the concept of emanation in a verbal form. He has
translated “from which all graces doth emanate” where literally the Arabic says only that it is “the
cause” ('illa) of the other graces.

The idea that we are indeed face to face with the Neoplatonic concept of emanation is confirmed

when we read the following text of ‘Abdu’l-Baha, for here we see him utilizing in a strikingly exact
manner the same images as Plotinus in the Enneads. After having established that the Holy Spirit is
“an intellectual condition” (haqiqat-i-ma'qul)565, he writes: “Therefore, as it is evident and clear that
the intellectual realities do not enter and descend, and it is absolutely impossible that the Holy Spirit
should ascend and descend, enter, come out, or penetrate, it can only be that the Holy Spirit
appears in splendour, as the sun appears in the mirror.”566 The same image is employed in a text
concerning the Trinity, in which he says that the divine reality is like a sun, the radiance of which is
reflected in the pure and polished mirror of the Christ.567 In the same vein, ‘Abdu’l-Baha declares in
another text: “As the pure mirror receives light from the sun and transmits this bounty to others, so
the Holy Spirit is the mediator of the Holy Light from the Sun of Reality, which it gives to the
sanctified realities (the divine Manifestations).”568

3. Transparent theology

We rediscover here the elements of this transparent theology which plays such an important role in
the writings of Baha’u’llah. God is presented therein as akin to a sun from which emanate the rays
which are the Holy Spirit. And this image of the light and of the sun is precisely the same that
Plotinus made use of in order to explain his concept of emanation. We find the best example of this
in the 4th Ennead, in which Plotinus wishes to explain how it is possible that the Soul can be present
everywhere in the universe while being nonetheless “indivisible and unextended” and without it [the
Soul] being an accident in a body. Plotinus finds the solution of this problem in affirming that the
presence of the Soul in the universe is similar to the light which radiates from a lamp or to the rays
which emanate from the sun:

“So also, if we can say from when comes the light of the sun, no less do we see the same light

Majmu'a min Alwah-i-Hadrat Baha'u'llah, p. 120; TB:141.
SAQ:XXV:124. The text reads “intellectual”. We would [adjust] this to “intelligible” in order to [point
out] the philosophical terminology in usage.

SAQ:XXV:124-125.
SAQ:XXVII:130-131.
SAQ:XXXVI:165

in all places and, it is not divided…If the sun, instead of being a body, was a power separated from a body and if it thereby produced its light, this light would not have a point of departure; we could not say from whence it came; there would be everywhere but one light without beginning or origin."569

Plotinus also uses the images of the lamp:

"…let us take as center a little luminous mass; let us place around it a spherical and transparent body, in such manner that the light propagates itself from the center throughout the sphere…The inner luminous center is not affected at all; but even as it remains immovable, it extends itself throughout the whole spherical mass and the light which we see shining in this little luminous mass fills the entire mass of the sphere. But the light is not derives from this little corporal mass itself; this mass possesses the light not because it is a body, but because it is a luminous body, because of a power which is different from a material power."570

Without doubt, for we who understand the nature of light and its mode of propagation, the reasoning of Plotinus seems very alembic. But we must not forget that he was explaining a totally new and unpublished concept for his epoch and thus difficult for his readers to understand. But if we look at them carefully, the images which Plotinus employs are not different from those of 'Abdu'l-Baha. It is thus the concept of emanation which we find in both the one and the other. The concept of emanation is thus an integral part of this transparent theology of which we are speaking, but it does not summarize it entirely. The theology of Baha'u'llah is a "speculative" theology, in the literal sense of the term, before being a theology of emanation. In Baha'i thought the transparent relation completes emanation even as procession in the Neoplatonism which it replaces.

There would be a
grave danger in confounding the transparent relation with Plotinian procession, from which it
distinguishes itself radically through the appearance of the notion of “manifestation” so fundamental
and so appropriate to Baha’i metaphysics.

The image of the mirror and the light which is reflected therein is utilized with a great abundance in
the Baha’i writings and characterizes diverse levels of relation. The Prophet is a mirror in which is
reflected “the Son of Reality”, the divine Essence, or the Holy Spirit. The soul of man is a mirror
which reflects the spiritual worlds or the divine Manifestation. The heart of man is a mirror which
reflects spiritual knowings or the spiritual qualities of the soul in its relationship with the lower world
[in which we dwell]. The physical world is itself a mirror which reflects the spiritual worlds, and,
more particularly, the spiritual and intelligible realities of Malakut. In seeing the manner in which
this image is taken up in multiple circumstances, we might be tempted to see in this a literary theme,
a simple metaphor, an artifice of language, a commodity of speech to refer to something so vague as
to be ineffable. This would be to underestimate the depth of the writings of Baha’u’llah. There is a
hidden relation between all of these mirrors. The image of the mirror intervenes in a very particular
context. It depicts the relation which exists between two realities of a different ontological level. God
and His Manifestation are of different ontological degrees. The Manifestation of God and the soul of
man are of different ontological degrees, and this is also the case with the soul and the body of man,

Enneads, VI.4, pp. 185-186.
Ibid., VI.4., p. 185.

or the soul of man and his psyche (nafs). We have already seen how the transparent character of the
relation between the soul and the body permitted us to avoid all of the philosophical problems which
derived from a “union of substance” and the multiplication of confused [entangled] essences which
results therefrom.

4. Emanation and Manifestation

There is thus a complementary relation between the concepts of emanation and of manifestation.
From God emanates the spirit which contains in itself the capacity to manifest all of His Names,
attributes and qualities. But creation in itself is neither an emanation of God, nor of an intermediary
hypostasis, and that is a fundamental distinction between Baha'i thought and all Neoplatonic
systems. Nonetheless, while God is far above all relation with His creation, through the emanation
of the Holy Spirit He is reflected (tajalli) in creation. This reflection is totally immaterial. It is even
above any relation of substance or essence. 'Abdu'l-Baha compares this relation to that of the artist
and his painting. The painting manifests the qualities of the painter, it emanates from him. But
never could we say that the spirit of the painter has incarnated itself in the painting. This painting
can represent a landscape or a still life. The pictorial expression communicates to us something of
the spiritual state of its author, but in no case will it inform us about his true appearance. In the
same way the divine essence remains unknowable. In the "Words of Paradise", Baha'u'llah writes:

"…while God is immeasurably exalted above all things. Every created being however
revealeth His signs which are but emanations from Him and not His Own Self.571 All these
signs are reflected and can be seen in the book of existence, and the scrolls that depict the
shape and pattern572 of the universe are indeed a most great book…Consider the rays of the
sun whose light hath encompassed the world. The rays emanate from the sun and reveal its
nature573, but are not the sun itself."574

Hence, we have that which manifests qualities, which are not intrinsic to itself. The divine
Manifestation manifests the divine qualities, notwithstanding that it is not Divinity. In the same way,
the spiritual qualities of man manifest his inner nature. But the inner nature of man must strip itself
of its own qualities in order to acquire the divine qualities, even as a bar of iron which is plunged
into the forge of the blacksmith acquires the qualities of [fire] in becoming

[hot] and radiant like the
fire. These qualities are not intrinsic to iron; what is intrinsic to iron is
to acquire the qualities of
[fire]. If we plunge a piece of wood into a forge, far from acquiring the
qualities of fire, it will be
consumed and will be destroyed. The forge, is the contact of man with the
divine Manifestation; the
Majmu'iy-i-Ishraqat, p. 116. The Persian text says simply: “Dar kull
ayyat-i-u-zahir. Ayyat az u, na u.” This
means, literally, “In all are manifested His signs. The signs are from Him
(come from Him), but are not
Him.” (The Arabic text of this passage says: “wa Ayatuh Zahiratun
fi'l-kulla wa minhu'l-Ayatu wa laysat nafsahu”,
in Majmu'a min Alwah-i-Hadrat Baha'u'llah, p. 78.)
A single word in Persian, naqsh means “appearance”, “plan”,
“structure”. It is understood that this is not
“form” in the Aristotelian sense.
Literally the Persian text means: “Consider the radiation (tajaliyyat) of the
sun [later: it]. Its rays envelop the
world, nevertheless the radiance [later: he] (comes) from it and manifests it
(zuhur-i-u'st) through his own self
(nafs) without being its own self.
Majmu'iy-i-Ishraqat, p. 116; TB:60-61.

fire, are the spiritual qualities which he acquires in his contact therewith
and which he becomes
capable of manifesting (zahir karban).

5. Function of the concept of emanation

The principal characteristic of the metaphysic of Baha’u’llah, common with
the majority of the
Persian metaphysics which preceded it, is in being a philosophy of emanation.
But does the concept
of emanation have in Baha’u’llah the same role and the same function as in
other systems? We think
not, and the differences found therein are at the same time negative and
positive.

If the metaphysic of Baha’u’llah is a metaphysic of emanation, it does not
put into play either the
concept of procession or that of hypostasis. Baha’u’llah is ten thousand
[leagues] from the onto-
cosmology of Ibn Sina which he considers to be pure fantasy. Baha’u’llah
breaks the line which for
ten centuries linked metaphysics to cosmology. He places ontological problems
in their [proper]

context, that is to say, in the domain which is that of pure thought, totally distinct from cosmogony.
Ontology is only one of the ways of seeing the universe. It is necessary, because it alone can permit the human spirit to understand the problems of the realities situated outside the sensible world. But it constitutes a rationalization of that which is difficult to rationalize. In this sense it can only be a partial description of the ultimate reality of the universe. Thus, ontological questions have for Baha'u'llah a very relative meaning, as he affirms in the "Seven Valleys"575, in saying that the distinction between the divine worlds depends upon the differences of the condition of the observer, or when he says in the "Tablet of Wisdom"576 that the affirmative or negative response to the question of whether or not the universe has or has not had a beginning depends above all on the perspective from which it is perceived.

Thus differing from all of the systems which were constructed after the Enneads of Plotinus, Baha'i metaphysics separates ontological questions from cosmological questions in rejecting the idea of the procession. But we could ask whether the Holy Spirit, as the Primal Will does not constitute in itself a hypostasis. And here we will see the appearance of the third radical distinction between the Baha'i and Neoplatonic concepts of emanation.

6. The refutation of the system of hypostases

If Plotinus set up the first entity emanating from the One as a hypostasis, and does the same with the Soul, was because he could not conceive that the One could have any relation whatsoever with the sensible world. This was a frontal hit upon the dogmas of Hellenistic philosophy as well as later those of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. So much so that, as we have seen, it is upon this point that were based the principal adaptations which permitted the transposition of Neoplatonism in the theology of Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless, the status of Intellect in the writings of the Islamic Neoplatonists is very different from the status of the Holy Spirit in the writings of Baha'u'llah.

For Baha'u'llah, the Holy Spirit is not an entity separated from God. If the Holy Spirit is the agent

SV:18-29.
TB:140; cf. TB:145.

of creation, it is even as the instrument is the agent of the artisan. To say that it was the Holy Spirit which created the universe does not mean that it was the origin thereof. The Holy Spirit does not have the status of a hypostasis. The Neoplatonists hypostatized the Intellect or the Soul in order to make autonomous Beings endowed with their own will. But if Baha'u'llah takes up the same images as those developed by Plotinus, in order to speak of emanation, it is in an entirely opposite manner.
For Plotinus, it is necessary to explain how the similar can engender the dissimilar, while all the while leaving a trace of its resemblance; for heat is not the fire, even if it resembles it. At the same time, he tries to show that the repetition of emanation does not result in a degradation of Being, while all the while explaining how each degree of Being can be independent of the One. For Baha'u'llah, what is necessary on the contrary is to show dependency. The Holy Spirit has no existence independent of God, no more than the light has an existence independent of the lamp.
The Holy Spirit is nothing other than the expression of the divine Will.

7. The divine Verb as the ontological cause

However, when Baha'u'llah says that the Holy Spirit is "the Cause of the entire creation"577, he does not speak of the material cause but of the ontological cause. In one sense, Baha'u'llah affirms the continuity between the spiritual universe and the physical universe, because he says that the divine Verb is an emanation which is the (ontological) cause of all the other emanations.578 He also says that the divine Verb "is none but the Command of God"579, even as he says that Nature (tabi'a), which is to say the physical and sensible world is "the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator" and "Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world."580

This distinction between the ontological cause and the physical cause is clearly established by Baha'u'llah because he says that in a sense, and it is this sense that we

interpret as ontological, the
universe is eternal. He says then that this is a “beginning that hath no
beginning, apart from its
being preceded by a Firstness [awwaliyya] which cannot be regarded as firstness
and originated by a
Cause inscrutable even unto all men of learning.”581 This ontological cause
here described as “a
Firstness [awwaliyya] which cannot be regarded as firstness”, without doubt
because it is situated in
the Aeon outside of time, is distinct from the physical cause, because
Baha’u’llah says a little later
that the universe was created by two forces, one active and the other
receptive:

“That which hath been in existence had existed before, but not in the form
thou seest today.
The world of existence582 came into being through the heat generated from the
interaction
between the active force (al-fa'il) and that which is its recipient
(al-munfa'il).583 These two are
TB:140.
TB:141.
Ibid.
Both phrases from TB:142. For the Names of God, please see the section on the
Theology of the Names in
the preceding chapter.
Majmu'iy-i-Matbu'iy-i-Alwah-i-Mubarakih, p. 40; TB:140.
Baha'u'llah says simply “wa ma kana”, which means “and that which is”.
Perhaps we must establish a
distinction between existence in the sense of wujud, which can encompass the
modes of intelligible existence,
and sensible being, which implies a less comprehensive concept.
Translated into French as “agent recepteur”, which might be rendered
“receptive agent”.

the same584, yet they are different.”585

This text makes one think immediately of the Big Bang [theory] of modern
astrophysics. We know
that the universe was born of a great concentration of energy which, in a space
reduced to a size
inconceivable to the human spirit, concentrated all the matter and energy of
the universe. The
expansion of this singularity of infinite grandeur generated a heat of more
than one hundred million
degrees centigrade, such that in the first seconds of the universe, the energy
could not exist except in

the form of photons, and at this moment the four fundamental forces of the universe—the electromagnetic, the weak interactives, the strong interactives, and gravitation—formed but one and the same force.586 Upon this point the text of Baha'u'llah is remarkably precise for if he supposes two agents at the origin of the universe, one is qualified as the "active force" (fa'il), but the other agent is not described as a passive force, but more as the receiver of the action which is thus situated on a different ontological and physical plan.

However, one detail which has escaped the attention of commentators up to the present is found in the last phrase of the passage: "These two are the same, yet they are different." The Arabic text literally says, are we must begin earlier in the passage in order to understand it: "That which came into being (takwana) through the heat generated by the encounter (imtizaj) of [the] active force (al-fa'il) with its receptive agent (al-munfa'il) which is the same as it ('aynuhu) and other than it (ghayruhu)." That which is the same and other applies to munfa'il because the relative pronoun (hu) is singular, which signifies that this munfa'il is simultaneously the same as the active force, fa'il, and nevertheless different. It appears very probable that Baha'u'llah was making allusion here to the theory of Sameness ('ayn) and of Otherness (ghayr) of Plato, for we are in the presence of terms in usage of the Arabic Platonic tradition. We could also see in this a principle of retroaction. The first force has retroacted upon itself. It is this retroaction which has produced in creation the first element of differentiation which is at the origin of the universe.

We see here how Baha'u'llah can utilize an ancient language in a totally new context in order to give it an expanded meaning. On the one hand, he expresses himself in a totally new manner upon the way in which the universe appeared and gives us a description which strikingly resembles that of modern physics. On the other hand, he underlines that this way of seeing has a kinship with the concepts of Plato on the mixture of the Same and the Other, for if he once more takes up the expression, it is to give it an expanded meaning which conforms to that which he has just said about

the active force and its object.

8. The world of the Aeon

All of this goes to show that Baha'u'llah distinguishes between the creation of the universe in [the dimension of] time, and in this sense alone it is possible to say that the universe has had a beginning in time; and creation in the Aeon (dahr), in which the concept of time has no place and where the notion of the past can not be understood except according to a sequence of ontological causality.

In Arabic: "lathi huwa 'aynuhu wa ghayruhu."
Majmu'iy-i-Matbu'iy-i-Alwah-i-Mubarakih, pp. 40-41; TB:140.
Steven Weinberg, Les trois premieres minutes de l'univers, Paris, 1980, p. 15f.

The world of the Aeon (dahr) is situated thus outside of space and time, that is to say, in the [world] of Malakut, in the sense in which this word encompasses the totality of the spiritual and intelligible world. The world of the Aeon is a purely ontological level the beings of which can only be understood in their relation to the First Cause. The Aeon is thus different from divine eternity, in which not only the concepts of space and time do not exist, but in which also disappear those of causality, anteriority, and firstness (awwaliyya).

This world of the Aeon can also be an allusion to this reality which in itself is outside of the phenomenal world, but the existence of which is manifested by the physical phenomena. The point of coalescence (taqyid) of the spiritual realities and the junction of Malakut with the physical world must be found in the world of the Aeon, which is a world of duration outside of chronological time.
We can thus infer that probably the Aeon is the time appropriate to the Imaginal World.

But how is one to pass from the spiritual world to the sensible world? Let us note that if Baha'u'llah tells us that the divine world is the cause of creation, he does not say how the emanation of the Holy Spirit results in other realities. Should we imagine that following a platonic scheme, a second emanation derives from the Holy Spirit? In no place does Baha'u'llah affirm this, and furthermore

he discourages all speculations upon this subject, in affirming that the cause of the appearance of the
universe is inscrutable to man. He furthermore says that the Holy Spirit “is God's all-pervasive
grace, from which all grace doth emanate”587 which we translate literally as “the first emanation,
which is the cause of the other emanations”. The phrase is formulated in such a way that we can as
easily understand that the other emanations emanate from the divine Verb or that they emanate
from God. Nowhere is the question clearly explained. Nevertheless, after a long study of the
metaphysic of Baha’u’llah, we have leaned in favor of the second solution: that the Holy Spirit is the
first emanation and the ontological cause of creation, but that the universe emanates directly from
God.

9. The transparent theology and the divine Verb

However, how can we maintain such a solution without ruining all that we have said preceding this,
and what role will then be reserved to the Holy Spirit? It is here that the transparent theology
intervenes. The Holy Spirit is the light which illumines all realities, spiritual and physical, intelligible
and sensible; that which gives them life. For Baha’u’llah does not cease to affirm that realities are
mirrors the function of which is to reflect the divine Verb. Thus does he write in [Kitab-i-Iqan]:

“Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the
revelation within it of the attributes and names of God588, inasmuch as within every atom
are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great
Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. How
resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of
wisdom that surge within a drop!”589
TB:141.
Here we see the appearance of a very strong tie between the transparent theology of Baha'u'llah and the
theology of divine Names.
KI:#107:100-101; GL:XC:177.

We understand now why the divine Verb can not be a hypostasis; its role can not be limited to a
single ontological sphere. It radiates upon all the spheres of Being, upon all its modes and upon all
the worlds. It assures the close link between the universal Manifestation (Jabarut as the world of the
Manifestation) and the divine Essence (Lahut), then between the universal Manifestation and the
individual Manifestations, that is to say the Prophets when considered in their "Malakutian" reality.
The divine Verb descends [through] all the degrees of Being from the world of the Manifestation to
the world of Nasut and Mulk. Thus it is the First Cause of creation.

Here as well, the transparent theology of Baha'u'llah, even if it takes up anew a portion of the
Ishraqi vocabulary, has nothing to do with their illuminative theosophy. Once more we must be
know how to go beyond the appearance of the words in order to attain to the new meaning which
Baha'u'llah gives to concepts.

We have come to see that the concept of emanation is entirely renovated by Baha'u'llah, but the
differences between the thought of Baha'u'llah and that of the principal philosophical schools of his
time do not stop there. Baha'u'llah does not give any place whatsoever to non-being in his
metaphysic. He makes no distinction between form and matter and he rejects the old scholastic
apparatus inherited from Avicennian Aristotelianism.

It does not seem that we can find in Baha'u'llah the concept of the unity of Being. For the
Neoplatonics, the One is Being and it is from this [One] that absolute Being emanates, which
fragments itself in all existing things. Being is thus divine. In the thought of Baha'u'llah the mode of
being of the divine Essence is completely different from the mode of being of the other realities. And
Being is always Being. In descending into different degrees of creation, it does not undergo any
weakening; it only differs in its mode of manifestation. Being is in some way the essential attribute of
the Holy Spirit, but it has no existence outside of Him. Being is a notion which is, above all,
conceptual.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

The concept of “divine Manifestation”, tied to that of the “World of the Manifestation”, is perhaps
the most characteristic concept of Baha’i metaphysics, and that which differentiates it the most from
all of the great monotheistic metaphysical [systems]. Also, before studying the World of the
Manifestation, we must first analyze the concept of the “divine Manifestation”.

1. The divine Manifestation as mirror of the Essence of God

The concept of “Manifestation” aims at resolving the fundamental problem in theology of the
relation between God and His terrestrial mouthpiece, be it an Avatar, an incarnation or a Prophet.
Two natural ways open to resolve this problem: either to affirm, as in Christianity, their identity

[that they are the same], or to say, as in Islam, that the Prophet is “a man like other men”590, simply
the transmitter of the divine Revelation. Between these two paths, the Baha’i Faith holds a totally
original position which, however, is not without analogy with the incarnationist Christian theology
in the solutions which it brings to this old problem, all while avoiding the [pitfalls]. On the one hand,
Baha’u’llah forcefully affirms that the divine Essence cannot incarnate itself, while on the other, he
affirms with the same force the divinity of [God's] terrestrial mouthpiece.

Baha’u’llah resolves the problem of the relation between God and His human mouthpiece in the
body of what we have called his “transparent theology”, that is to say, this catroptic science which
explains creation as the effect of a theopany (tajalli) of the divine Names in the mirrors of different
spiritual and material worlds. This catroptic relationship between God and His Manifestation is
furthermore the only domain in which we it is legitimate to use the word “theology”, for, we have
understood that in the Baha’i Faith, a discourse on God, or a “science of God” is totally
inconceivable, inasmuch as God is “the Absolutely Unknowable” (Majhul al-mutlaq). We do not know
God except through the manifestation of His Names and Attributes in the mirror of His creation.

Even a discourse upon these Names and Attributes is impossible because they themselves proceed
from an anthropic illusion which makes us see as multiple what is fundamentally one. The word
“theology” can not thus be used except in the context of this transparent metaphysic, in order to
explain the relation between God and His first Mirror, the universal Manifestation. Baha’u’llah
writes in “Kitab-i-Iqan”:

“The door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days being thus closed in the face of all
beings, the Source of infinite grace, according to His saying: “His grace transcendeth all
things; My grace hath encompassed them all” hath caused those Gems of Holiness to
appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be
made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the
unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence.”591

The divine Manifestations thus are pure mirrors which have the full capacity to reflect “the Sun of
Reality” (shams-i-haqiqat), and it is only through them that we can perceive the divine light. From this
very simple transparent relationship at least three principles are forthcoming. The first is that true
comprehension of the unicity of God consists in affirming the unicity of God and His Manifestation.
The second principle derives from the first, and consists in affirming that the divine Manifestations
form but one and the very same person. The third is called by Baha’is “the principle of progressive
revelation”. It indicates that the divine Manifestations give to men a relative and progressive
teaching adapted to their comprehension and to social, historical and cultural conditions of the place
and epoch in which they are manifested.

2. The true divine unicity

The concept of unicity (tawhid), as we know, is the central concept of Muslim theology. It consists in
affirming that God is unique, uncreated and inaccessible, and that He has no associate, no partner

Qur'an IX:109

(sharik), and that nothing can limit His Omnipotence. This theology aims at establishing in first place the divine transcendence in reaction to Semite polytheism. However, just like the incarnationist Christian theology, this theology rapidly encountered dilemmas difficult to resolve: how to reconcile, for example, this affirmation of the absolute divine unicity with the theology of the divine attributes contained in the Qur'an. Do not the attributes become associates of the divine Essence? Facing these problems the Mu'tazili did not hesitate to negate the existential reality of the divine attributes in order to make thereby pure distinctions of thought. Baha'i thought, on its part, very simply resolves these problems in the framework of its transparent theology. Moreover this leads very directly to affirm the unicity of God and of His Manifestation, or rather, their inseparability. Baha'u'llah writes:

"The essence of belief in Divine unity (tawhid) consisteth in regarding Him Who is the Manifestation (mazhar) of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the unknowable Essence as one and the same."592

The divine Manifestations thus have but one will which is the divine Will. Everything that emanates from Them emanates from God. Their word is the Word of God. Their own self is totally annihilated in order to leave this place to the divine Self (nafs-i-rahmani). Thus it is that Baha'u'llah writes in "Kitab-i-Iqan":

"These sanctified Mirrors, these Day Springs of ancient glory, are, one and all, the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the eternal Orb of the universe, its Essence and ultimate Purpose. From Him proceed their knowledge and power; from Him is derived their sovereignty. The beauty of their countenance is but a reflection of His image, and their revelation a sign of His deathless glory. They are the Treasuries of divine knowledge, and the Repositories of celestial wisdom. Through them is transmitted a grace that is

infinite, and by them is revealed the light that can never fade."593

"These Tabernacles of holiness, these primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of Invisibles. By the revelation of these Gems of divine virtue all the names and attributes of God, such as knowledge and power, sovereignty and dominion, mercy and wisdom, glory, bounty and grace, are made manifest."594

These citations illustrate very well this transparent theology of which we have spoken, for we see here that the divine Manifestation is called the "primal Mirror". It is thus from his radiation, which is in fact an emanation from the divine Verb, upon which depends the existence of the world of creation.

This transparent theology was the source of much incomprehension in the Muslim world, habituated as it was to considering the Prophet only as a man who was endowed with a divine election. The Muslim cleric accused Baha'u'llah to have taught that he was God Himself, or that

GL:LXXXIV:167
KI:#106:99-100; GL:XIX:47
KI:#109:103; GL:XIX:47-48

God was incarnated in him595, which is an absurdity.

Baha'u'llah affirms that the divine Manifestations retain their human rank, but to this is superimposed the prophetic Spirit which confers upon them "the attributes of Godhead, Divinity, Supreme Singleness, and Inmost Essence"596. And he adds: "Through their appearance the Revelation of God is made manifest, and by their countenance the Beauty of God is revealed. Thus it is that the accents of God Himself have been heard uttered by these Manifestations of the divine Being."597

Thus, the divine Manifestations have two aspects, "the station of distinction"598 and that of "essential unity"599. In the first aspect we see that these Manifestations have each "a distinct

individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined Revelation, and specially designated
limitations”600, which correspond to their human rank, in which we can attest that “they manifest
absolute servitude, utter destitution and complete self-effacement. Even as He saith: 'I am the
servant of God. I am but a man like you.'“601 The station of distinction is thus also that of servitude
('ubudiyya) which the Prophet shares with all the creatures. However, in the rank of “essential unity”
the Prophet no longer manifests the station of “absolute servitude”, but rather that of “Divinity”
(uluwiyya)602. Baha’u’llah writes in “Kitab-i-Iqan”:

“Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: 'I am God!' He verily
speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto. For it hath been repeatedly demonstrated that through their Revelation, their attributes and names, the Revelation of
God, His name and His attributes, are made manifest in the world.”603

3. The Alpha and the Omega

The unity of the divine Manifestation with the Essence of God supposes a second unity which is that
of all of the divine Manifestations with one another. All are the manifestations of the same Spirit
(nafs-i-rahmani), all reflect the same light and demonstrate the same qualities, even as Baha’u’llah
writes in “Kitab-i-Iqan” that “these Birds of the Celestial Throne are all sent down from the heaven of
the Will of God, and as they all arise to proclaim His irresistible Faith…”604 For each manifestation
is but the particular manifestation of the universal Manifestation (mazhar-i-kulli),which is the degree
of “essential unity” in which it forms but one and the same reality with the divine Essence. It is thus

This is the doctrine of hulul (incarnation) which is explicitly condemned by Baha'u'llah.
KI:#193:177; GL:XXII:53
KI:#193:177-178; GL:XXII:53
KI:#191:176; GL:XXII:52/KI:#194:178
KI:#161:152; GL:XXII:51/KI:#191:176
KI:#191:176; GL:XXII:52
KI:#194:178; GL:XXII:53-54
KI:#193:177; GL:XXII:53/KI:#198:181; GL:XXII:55-56
KI:#196:178; GL:XXII:54
KI:#161:152; GL:XXII:50

that Baha'u'llah writes, continuing that same sentence: "…they therefore are regarded as one soul and the same person."605 This is elaborated in a subsequent passage: "For they are all but one person, one soul, one spirit, one being, one revelation. They are all the manifestation of the 'Beginning' and the 'End,' the 'First' and the 'Last,' the 'Seen' and the 'Hidden'—all of which pertain to Him Who is the Innermost Spirit of Spirits and Eternal Essence of Essences."606 In the same Book he writes: "Through the manifold attributes of these Essences of Detachment, Who are both the First and the Last, the Seen and the Hidden, it is made evident that He Who is the Sun of Truth [shams-i-haqiqat] is 'the First and the Last, the Seen and the Hidden.'607 "608 It was in order to express this reality that Jesus said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega" 609 and Muhammad declared, "I am all the Prophets".610

From this point of view, each Prophet can be considered the return of his predecessor, for he manifests the same qualities. Baha'u'llah uses the image of the sun.611 The ascends and descends every day. Each rising and setting represents one [prophetic] Dispensation, and nonetheless it is the same setting as in the past. Moreover, the people remain turned towards the West where they perceived the last rays of the sunset, thus without seeing the dawning light which arises in the East.
In another image, Baha'u'llah compares the station of differentiation to the lamp and the station of unity to the light.612 Certain ones, instead of adoring the light, adore the lamp. This is why, when the same light appears in a different lamp, they do not recognize it, because they only know the lamp and see only the exterior appearance of the form without discerning the interior reality of the light.

4. Progressive Revelation

From the unity of God and the unity of His Manifestations comes forth a third principle which we might call the unity of Revelation, but which the Baha'is prefer to call "the principle of progressive revelation". This principle is, without doubt, the most original

element in the thought
of Baha'u'llah, for it comes out of the domain of metaphysics in order to open up a theory of the
evolution of civilizations and a philosophy of history in general.

The central idea of the entire concept of progressive revelation is that man has only a relative
knowledge of religious truth. God, from age to age, sends divine educators to humanity,
Prophets, Avatars or Manifestations, depending on the terminology we might wish to adopt, who
give to men a religious teaching corresponding to the capacities of comprehension of an epoch,
determined by the spiritual, social and historical conditions of a given culture.

Ibid.
KI:#196:179; GL:XXII:54
Qur'an LVII:3
KI:#151:142-143
Book of Revelation I:8,11; XXI:6; XXII:13
KI:#161:153; GL:XXII:51/KI:#172:162
KI:#20:21; GL:XIII:22/KI:#171:161
SAQ:77,134,155,168,288/TAB:III:643; BWF:392/PUP:152,168/PT:137

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This religious teaching is composed of two parts. In one part we find a spiritual teaching which is
eternal, but which must nevertheless be adapted to the human capacities of comprehension in
relation to the given culture and epoch. This teaching is thus adapted to the exigencies of time
and place. In the other part we find the social laws which change over time in order to adapt
themselves more readily to historical and social conditions and which aim to remedy problems of
an essentially social nature. Such are, for example, the laws of marriage and divorce, inheritance
and abstinence from certain foods.

In this way, the differences between religions are explained. But never are these differences
fundamental, for the spiritual message is one. It is always a message of love which aims to
establish peace and concord upon the earth and to enable man to discover his true spiritual
nature.

However, Baha'u'llah goes further. He ties the continuous process of

Revelation to that of
civilization. If the nature of man is spiritual, civilization must also become spiritual. Thus
spiritual civilization is contrasted with material civilization. The divine Revelations are the
founders of civilization, for civilization is defined above all by a system of values. We speak of
Hindu civilization, Christian civilization, Islamic civilization, but we do not know any atheist
civilization. All civilizations are born in the sacred and have a spiritual spark, no matter how
feeble, at their origin.

The process of civilization is a quasi-biological process. At the moment at which a new revelation
appears there begin, after a gestation period of more or less length, to appear signs of a new
civilization established upon new spiritual values. The dynamism of the new civilization is based
upon the pertinence of the new revelation and of its teachings which permit social maladies
which were hitherto incurable to heal. Then this [old] civilization runs out of breath. At the
moment at which it attains its apogee, a new social problem appears with numerous maladies for
which religion no longer has any response. Dogmatism replaces the spiritual teachings, the
theologians render fundamental truths obscure, the priests corrupt the religious institution, and
thus religion and civilization are found to be in a process of inexorable decline until a new
Revelation appears which starts up the process again.

The Book of revelation and the cycles of human civilization are closely linked. But, Baha'u'llah
teaches that there is a directing principle which ties together all of the revelations. This directing
principle is that of Unity. Each revelation has sought to construct a large social unity. There was
a time when the Prophets addressed only a tribe, as in the case of the Judaic Prophets, or to a
specific people, as [in the case of] Zoroaster or Krishna. When Jesus came, he preached a
religion which was addressed to multiple peoples, during an epoch in which the dominant
political system, be it of the city-state, be it of the Roman Empire, was founded upon a unity of
culture. With Islam there appeared the first nation-state founded upon a

religious identity, which
permitted the encompassing of very divers peoples and which aspired to universality. Religion
thus influenced the process of civilization by transcending the particularisms in order to create an
ever-increasingly universal social identity. But this process, Baha'u'llah tells us, should not stop
there. Humanity is placed at a new turning place in its history. The dangers which threaten it are
so great that it can bring about its own destruction. This is why the need of a new Revelation is
felt, [one] which would establish new spiritual values upon the basis of which we might construct
the first universal civilization of humanity. This civilization founded upon the unification of

political and social structures at a planetary level is the only way to banish war, through a system
of collective security upheld by a global parliament, and thus to establish the peace the vision of
which the Prophets like Isaiah and Jesus never stopped giving to us.

We see thus that the prophetology of Baha'u'llah opens up upon a philosophy of history already
very complicated and that it is in direct relation to his political thought.

5. Progressive Revelation and axiological hermeneutics

The concept of "progressive revelation" leads to a fourth form of hermeneutic which we will call
"axiological hermeneutic". The aim of the teaching of the divine Manifestations is to enable man
to progressively discover the world of spiritual values which are nothing other than the totality of
the laws which govern the universe. These values, of laws, exist in the sphere appropriate to each
spiritual world. In descending the hierarchy of the divine worlds, they take in each one the form
adapted to that world. The role of the Manifestation is to translate these transcendental values
into a language accessible to human hearing. Baha'u'llah here resolves one of the difficulties
inherent in every philosophical system established upon transcendence: how to affirm on the one
hand the transcendence of spiritual values and on the other hand the liberty of man. The concept
of "progressive revelation" explains how, on the one hand there exist

transcendent and absolute values, and on the other hand why man has only a relative knowledge thereof. This is a historicization of ethics and even of spiritual comprehension. The progressive and relative discovery of this world of spiritual values constitutes what we call an axiological hermeneutic.

The role of the axiological hermeneutic goes far beyond problems of values. It furnishes the key to a philosophy of history which alone can give meaning to a universal hermeneutic. The historicist hermeneutic of Boeckh613 and of Droysen614 and in particular post-modernist hermeneutics, in particular that of Gadamer615, are very critical of an axiological hermeneutic, because it assumes that there is an objective meaning to history. But, if historicist hermeneutics proclaims the relativity of ethical and social values, it must apply this relativity to the very points of view of the historian and the hermeneutist; at least to suppose that these have truly discovered the universal principle which gives the definitive key to human becoming, even as Hegelism and Marxism [claimed]. It is this same reproach which was addressed to Baha'i philosophy. That which Baha'u'llah assumes with the principle of progressive revelation, is that there exist in certain epochs of history, those in which a new religious message is revealed, a principle of legitimation which permits them to affirm that the meaning of history which is proclaimed is relatively superior and permits a reinterpretation of universal history as the function of a new comprehension of the spiritual destiny of humanity. The teleological principle of this axiological hermeneutic resides in the fact that the meaning of history is accomplished in man's discovery of his humanity. The humanity of man being his spiritual nature, which is accomplished

A. Boeckh, Enzyklopaedie und Methodenlehre des Philogischen Wissenschaften, text established by E. Bratuschek, 1877, 2nd edition, Leipzig, 1886. Also see Jean Grondin, L'universalite de l'hermeneutique, Paris, 1993, pp. 101-106.

J. G. Droysen, Historik, text established by R. Huebener, Munich, 1937. Also see J. Grondin, op. cit., pp. 106-115.

Translator's Note: For a biography and bibliography for Hans-Georg Gadamer please see:
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer/

progressively through the discovery and the interiorization of spiritual values which become the only true progress of man. The will to give meaning to human destiny, be it individual or collective, is an inherent endowment of man and is part of his spirituality. To oppose this will to give meaning in the name of a new Stoicism is to proclaim a philosophy of despair. The purpose of the message of Baha'u'llah is to bring about the rediscovery of this individual and collective destiny without which no projected civilization can exist.

6. The World of Revelation

If we return to the divine world of the "Tablet of All Food", we will see that the world of "Revelation" corresponds more or less to Jabarut. We say more or less, because on the one hand we have encountered in Lahut the Universal Manifestation in a state of nondifferentiation from the divine Essence, and we have seen on the other hand that it is in the plan of Malakut that the individual reality of the divine Manifestations exists. In fact, even as we have already said, these two nomenclatures of the divine worlds do not function in the same manner, and to wish to establish between them exact correspondences is a hazardous enterprise. This shows in any case that the nomenclature of the five worlds of Islamic tradition is not adapted to the theology of manifestation of Baha'u'llah, and, by this fact, this explains its essentially hermeneutic value.

The World of Revelation is not a simple intermediary world between God and the creature. It is a world in itself, existing for itself. We must thus try to clarify its characteristics. This world is at the same time that of Spirit, that of the divine Verb, and that of Revelation.

The World of Manifestation begins with the Primal emanation. It is first the world of the Holy Spirit, even though the Holy Spirit also belongs to the divine sphere. But the World of Revelation is a world of pure spirit no matter what form this takes. By the intermediary

of the World of
Revelation, the Holy Spirit incarnates itself in the first mirrors of the
divine Manifestations. It is
thus that the Holy Spirit becomes the divine Verb, the Logos, the Creative
Word. The divine
Manifestations are all the incarnations of the divine Verb. It is by this title
that they reflect the
power of God, that they are invested with His sovereignty, that they manifest
His knowledge. As
the divine Verb, they manifest all the Names and Attributes of God in their
perfection, perfection
which cannot but be glimpsed imperfectly in their terrestrial manifestation and
limited while
these perfections appear without limitation in the World of Revelation.

The divine Manifestations are spirits created by God before the world of
creation. They are thus
preexistent in relation to the world of creation, but of course they are not
preexistent in relation
to the divine Essence. They are simply outside of contingent time.

This preexistence makes that the divine Manifestations are the first spirits to
know God. In
relation to this world they play the same role which the anthropic spirit plays
in relation to the
World of Creation. Thereby the divine Manifestations become the direct cause of
the existence of
the world of creation, even though the first cause is of God. Because of this
fact, we can write, as
Paul says of Christ616, that they created the world.

Ephesians 3:1; Colossians 1:16

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7. The divine Word

The divine Manifestations are the channels through which revelation descends to
the World of
Creation. Revelation is a force which works in this world and which determines
the evolution
thereof—it is thus not confounded with the revealed Word. The force which
guides human
history, like that which determines the evolution of the spiritual worlds is
the force of Revelation.
The spiritual man who has arrived at a true gnostic comprehension can see the
force of
revelation in the work of every thing, in every event of life.

8. The Primal Will and the Countenance of God

The divine Manifestation constitutes the last limit of human consciousness617, the Sadratu'l-
Muntaha, the Tree beyond which there is no passing. Everything that we are used to report of
God actually reports only of His Manifestations, who are the “Primal Mirrors” of the divine
Essence.618 But, in these Mirrors, it is not the divine Essence which is reflected, but the Primal
Will, for the Primal Will is the manifestation of all the perfections and all the divine Names and
Attributes.619 This Primal Will is thus the First emanation (sadir) of God620, which makes the
junction between the divine Essence and the Primal Mirror. It is in this sense that we can identify
the Manifestation of God with this same Primal Will.621 For God can not have Attributes.622
These proceed from the anthropic illusion, even as it is said in the “Long Obligatory Prayer”
(salat-i-kabir): “I testify that Thou hast been sanctified above all attributes and holy above all
names.”623 The divine Attributes thus have no existence in the world of the divine Essence, but
derive their source from the World of Command ('alam-i-amr), and the Manifestation of God is
their most perfect theophany. It is for this reason that Baha’u’llah teaches that the divine
Manifestation constitutes “the Countenance of God” (Laqa Allah), and interprets all of the verses
of the Qur'an which contain this expression as references to the next prophetic manifestation,
that is to the Bab or to himself.

Davudi, Uluhiyyat va Mazhariyyat, pp. 138-141
Translator’s Note: KI:#109:103.
(578) Davudi, op. cit., p. 177
(579) Ibid., p. 100
(580) Ibid., p. 45
(581) Ibid., pp. 23, 61-69, 99-103
(582) This is the translation of Shoghi Effendi, as found in “Baha'i Prayers” (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing
Trust, 1991, p. 12). The Arabic text is: “Ashhadu innaka kunta muqadasan 'an al-sifati wa munazahan 'an al-
ism”.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:
THE NATURE OF THE SENSIBLE UNIVERSE

An aspect which can seem particularly platonic in the language of Baha'u'llah is found, on the one hand, in the classical distinction he establishes between the sensible world and the intelligible world, and, on the other hand, in his evocation of non-empirical realities, which pose the problem be it of the existence of Ideas which populate the intelligible world, or be it the existence of an intermediary world, which the philosophers call the "Imaginal World", and in which exist the archetypes of terrestrial things. We have encountered many examples of the first case in Chapter Five, notably with the development which we have consecrated to "the visible and invisible world" (Malakut al-ghayb wa'l-shuhud). We have encountered an example of the second [case] in the Tablet of Varqa in which Baha'u'llah defines the Imaginal World. However, we must restrain ourselves from reaching hasty conclusions regarding the utilization of this vocabulary. Baha'u'llah, like the Muslim philosophers, takes up the ancient philosophical vocabulary while giving new meanings to the words. In the following pages we will attempt to clarify the nature of the "realities" which populate the spiritual worlds in the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah, and then we will examine the relations which the world of the invisible ('ama) can have with the physical world.

1. The primal nature of the universe

Baha'u'llah knew the Platonic origin of the theory of Ideas, but not only does he give all the credit for it to Socrates, but he gives it also a definition which has as its consequence a considerable enlargement of the concepts as articulated by Plato, and to bring them considerably closer to the perspective of modern science. Baha'u'llah writes about Socrates [in Lawh-i-Hikmat]:

"He it is who perceived a unique, a tempered, and a pervasive nature in things, bearing the closest likeness to the human spirit, and he discovered this nature to be distinct from the substance of things in their refined form. He hath a special pronouncement on this weighty theme. Wert thou to ask from the worldly wise of this generation about this exposition, thou wouldst witness their incapacity to grasp it."624

There is no doubt that in the ages to come these few lines will bring forth numerous commentaries.
Baha'u'llah affirms that behind sensible realities, there is "a nature" which resembles the human
spirit, hence intelligible, which possesses the qualities he enumerates. In order to understand this text
well, we must now return to the original Arabic. A literal translation of the text is simply impossible,
because Western languages do not make use of an equivalent technical vocabulary.

Baha'u'llah says that Socrates recognized "the nature" (with the definite article in the original and
without the definite article in the English translation). He describes this nature by three qualifications,
which are: makhsusa, mu'tadila and mawsuf bi'l-ghabala. Makhsusa signifies "particular," "special",
"specific". The word comes from the root KHSS which has very extensive meanings which are

Lawh-i-Hikmat, in Majmu'at min Alwah Hadrat-i-Baha'u'llah, p. 125; TB:146

related to "distinguish", "separate by lot", "confer",
"assign", etc. The word makhsus was adopted
into Persian with most of the words of its family, that of khass, which has the meaning "special",
"belonging", "noble", "elevated" and "pure". We should also
note the Arabic word Khassa which
means "exclusive property", "particularity", "attribute",
"essence", "intrinsic nature".

Our problem is to understand here [in this text,] in what sense this nature is "special", or rather to
identify in what way the word makhsusa can have a more subtle meaning than the English word
"unique". The etymological study leads us to understand by "special nature" a nature the properties
of which are intrinsic, that is to say, belonging to itself, not dependent except upon itself (or upon its
first cause) to the exclusion of other exterior realities, not accidental; which is to say the properties
which are directly the manifestation of its own essence.

The second qualification is mu'tadila, which the English translator has rendered as "tempered",
which we [might also translate] as "soft". The Arabic dictionaries give [multiple meanings to this
word, including] "straight", "equal", "united", "proportioned",

“symmetrical”, “harmonious”, “moderate”, “tempered”, “soft” and “clement”. The word combines at least two concepts. The first is that of “straight” and “united”. This signifies that the nature in question is made of a substance (if it is permitted to utilize the word substance) [which is] simple, unified, in which one can distinguish neither form nor parts. The second concept is that of equilibrium. The “unified” character of the nature in question results from its mode of existence which is based upon its self-sufficient internal equilibrium, from whence in the second degree, the idea of harmony and symmetry which leads to aesthetic considerations.

The third qualification is more difficult to explain. “Mawsuf bi'l” signifies “describable according to”. “Ghalaba” can be translated by “superiority”, but also means the fact of imposing domination. The idea here is that this “nature” is insinuated in all things, or that all things are dependent upon it.

Baha’u’llah then clarifies that this “nature” is distinct from the “subtle body” (al-jasadi'l-jawwani). This is a direct allusion to the doctrine of the Ishraqiyyun who believed that the realities of Malakut were made of a “jassad” (body) more subtle than matter, but the existence of which was nevertheless not purely spiritual. It was some kind of an essential substance, if this pleonasm is possible. In saying this, Baha’u’llah wishes to entirely avoid the list of corporalizing this nature. At the same time, we better understand the word “nature”, which is employed here by default. It is not a reality (haqa'iq) because realities are multiple and the only absolute reality (haqiqat) is God (Haqq). It is not an essence (dhat) because the essence manifests itself in the attributes. Nor is it a substance (jawhar) nor even less so a body or material. We are thus faced with the most essential reality of the universe. It is the reality which is found outside of sensible matter but which is not a spiritual being (like the divine Verb for example). But this nature is like the human spirit; thus it manifests itself through intelligible qualities. We thus find ourselves at the junction between the intelligible world and the sensible world. It is without doubt the first degree

of substantification
and of coalescence (taqyid).625

In reading the description of Baha’u’llah, we cannot restrain ourselves from thinking of the
theory of quantum void in modern physics. This [theory] shows that beyond matter and energy,
Lawh-i-Hikmat, in Majmu'at min Alwah Hadrat-i-Baha'u'llah, p. 126; TB:146

not only do there exist objects that have but a virtual existence, but that these objects can be
nothing other than fluctuations of fields. This text on the “nature” can be related to other texts
by Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha upon ether and the existence of a reality outside of matter
which does not have a single corporeal attribute and which is similar to the nature of the human
spirit. It is this nature which is similar to the human spirit which Baha’u’llah calls “ethereal”,
which means simply non-corporeal, in a usage which one finds elsewhere, in many of the
philosophers of the School of Isfahan. The existence of ether as it was formulated in antiquity
was totally contradicted by modern physics. The physicists from the 17th to the 19th century
postulated that space must be filled with a subtle fluid. The existence of this subtle fluid, more
subtle than air, was to permit the propagation of light. Physics showed that there existed in space
no subtle substance capable of being apprehended with an means of measurement, and ether was
ranks in the museum of obsolete theories along with phlogiston and many others. It is not in this
direction that we should search for the ether about which Baha’u’llah speaks. However, even as
we have recalled, in evoking the theory of the quantum void, we now know that emptiness as a
pure state does not exist. Two facts oppose this: the first is that a portion of the void is always a
portion of space and with space are associated a certain number of characteristics, such as the
curvature of space and a number n of dimensions; the second reason relates to the property of
some quantum objects to manifest themselves where before there was nothing measurable, and
to the fact that the quantum void can be analyzed in terms of fields. Finally,

all of these particles
can be analyzed as a fluctuation of fields and a localization of information. In this way ‘Abdu’l-
Baha can be understood, when he affirms that “the light of the lamp exists through the vibration
of the etheric matter”.xxiv ‘Abdu’l-Baha says that this ethereal matter “is an intellectual
[intelligible] reality, and is not sensible”626, and he adds that “In the same way, nature, also, in its
essence is an intellectual reality and is not sensible; the human spirit is an intellectual, not sensible
reality.”627

2. Sensible reality and intelligible reality

This invites us to look into the difference between sensible realities and intelligible realities. But,
curiously, ‘Abdu’l-Baha does not give a positive definition of intelligible realities. He proceeds by
exclusion to affirm that everything which is not sensible is intelligible. The sensible (mahsus)
realities are those about which our senses inform us.628 He cites for example the sun, sounds,
perfumes, foods, heat, cold. The intelligible (ma'qulih) realities have “no outward form and no
place and [are] not perceptible to the senses.”629 He cites as examples intellect, love, ethereal
matter, nature, and the human spirit. For Him, the principal characteristic of the intelligible
realities is that they are beyond language:

“So the symbol of knowledge is light, and of ignorance, darkness; but reflect, is knowledge
sensible light, or ignorance sensible darkness? No, they are merely symbols. These are
only intellectual states, but when you desire to express them outwardly, you call

SAQ:XVI:83-84; cf. SAQ:XLVIII:190-191
SAQ:XVI:84
SAQ:XVI:80
Ibid.

knowledge light, and ignorance darkness. You say: “My heart was gloomy, and it became
enlightened.” Now, that light of knowledge, and that darkness of ignorance, are
intellectual realities, not sensible ones; but when we seek for explanations in

the external
world, we are obliged to give them a sensible form."630

The intelligible realities have two principal properties. They can not be detected by the senses
and they are beyond language. This definition of intelligible realities is very different from a
platonic definition. For Plato, the intelligible realities can not be grasped by the senses, but they
can be understood by the intelligence. Intelligence alone can escape the sensory illusion, hence its
superiority. This is, for Plato, the basis of the theory of Ideas, because one must suppose that
beyond the world which can be perceived by the senses there is a purely intelligible world. For
Plato, the ideas which populate this intelligible world are realities in themselves which become
the norms or the eternal types of things. In the thought of 'Abdu'l-Baha, intelligence in the sense
of the capacity to reason does not see itself able to recognize the same efficaciousness [as in
Plato,] because it is too dependent upon language. We must thus have recourse to intuition
which is the capacity of man to directly apprehend certain realities without having recourse
either to sensible representations or to language.

Here is posed the problem of certain realities which participate in the two modes, the intelligible
and the sensible. This problem is not directly approached by 'Abdu'l-Baha, but we will see that it
is essential to understand the nature of the imaginal realities. An example is that of numbers.
Numbers are at the same time sensible realities and intelligible realities. We can say that it is
possible tat the concept of each number was born of the empirical experience of man. We can
imagine that the concept of the digit 3 was directly born of the perception of that which a set of
three apples and a set of three pebbles have in common. This experience represents the sensible
reality of the number. But this does not inhibit the number 3 having an existence independent of
the spirit of man, because it is contained in the architecture of the universe. The problem
becomes more complex when we imagine the case of mathematical objects having an increasing
complexity. We understand very well that man can have an empirical experience

of the digit 3
but it becomes more difficult to derive this experience in relation to the number 1239, because
we cannot grasp empirically, by the senses, what a set of 1239 apples and one of 1239 pebbles
have in common. The empirical experience of the number 3.141592653…631 is even more
difficult to imagine, like all of the complex mathematical expressions, or the formulas as for
example those which describe the wavelike function of a particle. We could thus say that the
number TT (pi) exists independently of the spirit of man, like the constant of Planck, and that it is
the same for all of the mathematical expressions. Unfortunately, all the mathematical expressions
are not inscribed in the universe. Mathematicians of a fertile spirit have invented all sorts of
mutually exclusive mathematical systems which have no relation to any reality whatsoever. We
can thus say that all mathematical objects have an existence independent of man.

If we return to the definition of intelligible realities of ‘Abdu’l-Baha, we will see that it
encompasses two kinds of realities, those which have an existence independent of man and those
which exist only in the human spirit. This is a fundamental distinction from classical Platonism.

Ibid.
Translator’s Note: TT (pi).

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN:
THE WORLD OF SPIRITUAL REALITIES

What then can be the mode of existence of the sensible realities and can they be considered identical
with the archetypes of the Imaginal World?

1. Commentary on the Hidden Treasure

Unfortunately, we do not have a single text from Baha’u’llah upon this question, but only a bundle
of allusions dispersed throughout all of his writings. We possess, on the other hand, a metaphysical
treatise drawn up by ‘Abdu’l-Baha which is a fairly complete work. This treatise, which we have
already made use of in the opening chapters of this study, is a commentary upon

a Sunni tradition
(hadith qudsi), well known in Islam, in which God says to the Prophet: “I was a Hidden Treasure, I
wished to be known and toward this end, I created the creation, that it might know Me.” When
Baha’u’llah was in Baghdad, a Pasha versed in the mystical sciences asked him to explain this
tradition.632 For reasons that are unknown, Baha’u’llah did not wish to author this commentary and
he asked ‘Abdu’l-Baha, who must have been about seventeen years old, to do so in his place. The
Commentary of ‘Abdu’l-Baha has taken its place in literature under the name “Commentary on the
Hidden Treasure” (Tafsir-i-Kuntu Kanzan Makhfiyyan), and we will refer to it in the following pages
under the name Tafsir.

This Tafsir testifies to an extraordinary mastery of philosophical and metaphysical questions in an
adolescent of seventeen years. ‘Abdu’l-Baha shows himself to be familiar therein not only with the
technical language of the different philosophical and theological schools, but moreover, he deploys a
remarkable knowledge of the vast diversity of their opinions and their theories. It seems that ‘Abdu’l-
Baha aimed at concision above all things. This Tafsir thus has a very collected and sometimes
elliptical character which does not facilitate its reading. ‘Abdu’l-Baha does not hesitate to have
recourse to logical arguments taken from Muslim scholasticism, as he will later in “Some Answered
Questions”. The Tafsir is very structured and follows a rigorous order. We are astonished at the
facility of ‘Abdu’l-Baha at summarizing in a few words a complex philosophical position, then to
analyze it and to subject it to critique.

The treatise has two “sides” so to speak: one turned towards Neoplatonic thought and the other
turned towards Sufism. The Neoplatonism to which it refers is not that of Ibn Sina, but a later
version which seems to be that taught in the theological schools of the time and thus strongly
influenced by the thought of Mulla Sadra. The Sufism to which ‘Abdu’l-Baha makes allusion is that
of Ibn al-'Arabi, and notably the philosophical positions which he summarized in his book “The
wisdom of the Prophets” (Fusus al-Hikma). However, ‘Abdu’l-Baha does not

name a single author
even though we find some textual citations from Ibn al-'Arabi. Questions are treated with much
subtlety and reserve, without doubt in order not to offend the intended reader of the Tafsir, who

GPB:241; Letter written to an individual believer on behalf of Shoghi Effendi by Ruhi Afnan, dated 18
January 1932, with note by Shoghi Effendi appended; in Messages to Canada, pp. 34-35; Adib
Taherzadeh, “The Revelation of Baha'u'llah,” Volume II, Chapter 18, pp. 390-391

must have had Sufi predilections. Therefore we must sometimes take care not to attribute to
‘Abdu’l-Baha a position which he does nothing other than cite.

The Tafsir is written in a very technical and probably untranslatable language. The specialists have
paid much attention to this text, but they are not all in agreement about the meaning of certain
passages. The definition of all the terms which ‘Abdu’l-Baha employs is known neither with
precision, nor with certitude. Everything that we have already said about the technical vocabulary of
Baha’u’llah applies equally to the Tafsir.

Our aim here will not be to discuss the Tafsir in its entirety, but only to extract the information
which relates to the question of the deployment of Being and the ontology of the divine worlds.
Nevertheless, in order not to complicate things too much, we will constrain ourselves to follow each
time it is possible the order of ‘Abdu’l-Baha's text, which is divided into four chapters treating
successively the Hidden Treasure, Love, Creation and Knowledge.

Greek Neoplatonism posed the question of the passage from the One to the multiple. It resolved this
problem as we have seen in the concepts of emanation and of procession and affirmed the existence
of hypostases the successive deployment of which explained the passage of the intelligible to the
sensible. We have seen that Baha’u’llah fundamentally rejects the idea of a hypostasis and
furthermore the idea of their procession in order to explain their deployment. We can then think
that if ‘Abdu’l-Baha relies in part on Ibn al-'Arabi, it is because Ibn

al-'Arabi manifested the same scruple, which permits ‘Abdu’l-Baha to situate himself in a perspective different from that of the ontology of Ibn Sina. However, if we remove from Muslim Neoplatonism the concepts of hypostasis and procession, this poses two fundamental problems – 1)How to explain the relation of the intelligible realities with God? 2)And how to explain the passage of the intelligible world to the sensible world from the ontological point of view? This is the problem which is found at the heart of the Tafsir.

2. The station of the Hidden Treasure and the Absconditum

The first chapter of the Tafsir pertains essentially to the first aspect of this question. ‘Abdu’l-Baha exerts himself to begin, with clarifying the relations which exist between the divine Essence and Its Attributes. This is what he calls “the station of the Hidden Treasure” which we have studied in detail in the second Chapter of this work. We will not return to this, except to highlight some nuances. ‘Abdu’l-Baha then deals with the problem of the knowledge of God. Can we consider this knowledge distinct from the divine Essence? Is divine knowledge a simple attribute of the Essence at the same level as such attributes as justice and compassion, or should one consider that its existence precedes the deployment of the attributes outside of the Essence? If we consider divine knowledge as an independent reality, can we then say that the ontological entities of Muslim scholasticism, like the archetypes (a'yan), the quiddities (mahiyyat), the spiritual realities (haqa'iq), and the eidetic forms (qabiliyyat) have an existence in the knowledge of God?

All of these questions have posed a problem since the beginning of Islam. We may recall that already, the Mu'tazili kalam (scholasticism) considered that the conditions of the unicity of God implied that the attributes of God were identical to His Essence and did not have a real existence. The Jahmists went further in purely and simply negating the existence of these attributes. Such a

position influenced the way in which the problem of the existence of a God

distinct from the world
could be dealt with. The Mu'tazili deduced that the knowledge that God has of the world is a new
knowledge (hadith), which is to say, subsequent to creation. Louis Gardet explains: “The Mu'tazili
asked if the knowledge which God has of things preceded them in existence or was born with them,
and they concluded that the whole had a “contingent” or “created” divine knowledge of free and
possible futures in general”633 We see that as to the point of the divine attributes, the positions of
‘Abdu’l-Baha are very close to those of the Mu'tazili, but that they deviate altogether on the
knowledge of God.

The questions which the Mu'tazili brought up became thereafter the touchstone of Muslim
philosophy and, until al-Ghazali, all the schools were defined in relation to them; which essentially
signifies that they critiqued them or that they sought to introduce nuances [to their conclusions]. All
the effort of ‘Abdu’l-Baha thus consists in disengaging himself from this scholasticism. The most
radical critique of the Mu'tazili will come from the Ash'ari, which will reproach him for having led to
“a total stripping of the notion of God”634. They attempted to suppress the doctrine of the Mu'tazili
on the existence of the attributes of God, by affirming on the one hand their existence, all the while
affirming on the other hand the incompatibility of their existence with the existence of God.635 Their
effort thus consisted in defining the narrow path between these two points. This led them to reject
Hellenistic Neoplatonism, but to accept a version moderated, inspired, according to certain authors,
by Christian theology. These borrowings refer notably to the notion of hypostasis (qudama)636, which
they adapted to Muslim theology. This is one of the points which ‘Abdu’l-Baha insistently refutes in
the Tafsir. Finally, the Ash'ari concluded that the knowledge of God is co-eternal with His Essence.
We only continue with these reports in order to show that the problems evoked by ‘Abdu’l-Baha
were found at the heart of Muslim theology and that it can be very useful in order to follow the
development of the thought of the author [of the Tafsir] to place it in the framework of these

theological battles which were present in the spirit of his interlocutor.

However, ‘Abdu’l-Baha will treat these questions with much subtlety and does not bring a strong attack upon one thesis, nor total agreement with another. For ‘Abdu’l-Baha, theological questions are reduced essentially to questions of language. And the world of Hahut, the Hidden Treasure, is beyond words and numbers.637 Consequently, to disassociate God from His knowledge is only a problem of language and it is of no profit to wrangle infinitely about problems which are born of the necessity of reasoning by analogy (tamthil) and by metaphor (tamsil). ‘Abdu’l-Baha thus declares that the only way to progress in comprehension of such problems, is to detach oneself from the limitations of analogy and metaphor638, which are unfortunately necessary in order to speak of intelligible realities. In one way, He probably means to say that discursive reason can not alone arrive at the understanding of these phenomena which necessitate having recourse to intuition.

Louis Gardet and M.M. Anawati, Introduction a la theologie musulmane, 3rd edition, Paris, 1981, p. 48
Ibid., p. 57
Henri Laoust, Les Schismes de l'Islam, Paris, 1965, p. 128
Ibid., p. 305
Tafsir, pp. 8-9
Tafsir, p. 11

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3. The mirror of divine knowledge

After having recalled the limitations of language, ‘Abdu’l-Baha concludes that the distinction of a divine knowledge is a purely conceptual question and that consequently this knowledge can not exist except in a transparent manner in the consciousness of God. We can not thus make any distinction between the Essence of God and His knowledge. As we see, it is a fairly radical way of treating almost ten centuries of debate.

This first point having been arrived at, ‘Abdu’l-Baha passes to the second, which concerns the mode of existence of the archetypes, the quiddities, the realities, the potentialities and other scholastic entities, concluding that these can only be “distant” (ba'id) from the

divine knowledge, otherwise said
that they can not exist in this form in the ontological sphere of the Hidden Treasure.639 As we see,
this is another radical conclusion.

Before arriving at these conclusions, ‘Abdu’l-Baha follows a very rigorous reasoning. He begins by
recalling the positions of the Sufis, which is to say of Ibn al-'Arabi. For the Sufis, the unmanifested
Essence (ghayb-i-huviyyih) considered in the station of unicity (ahadiyyat) is without names and
attributes. We can just as well say that the names and attributes are in this station, intermingled with
the divine Essence, without one being able to make the least distinction between them, or between
them and the Essence. If it is thus for the names and attributes,
‘Abdu’l-Baha adds, then a fortiori [it is
the same] for the potential spiritual realities
(haqa'iq-i-shu'unat-i-ilahiyyih).640 The archetypes (a'yan), the
spiritual realities (haqa'iq) and the quiddity of things (mahiyyat-i-ashya) cannot but exist in union with
the Essence and at the interior therein, for otherwise this would be a negation of the station of
unicity. These entities are contained in the Essence as the letters of the alphabet are contained in the
point, or like all the digits and the numbers are contained in One. These intelligible realities can not
exist in the Essence except in this potential form which is called “potential distinctions” (shu'unat-i-
dhatiyyih)or “seminal reasons” no trace of which we find. In the second part of this exposition,
‘Abdu’l-Baha takes a clear stand. Then, He returns to the exposition of the conceptions of Ibn al-
'Arabi.

This exposition integrates numerous Neoplatonic elements. At the summit is found the
unmanifested Essence of God (ghayb-i-huviyyih). In the Essence is produced a double movement. The
first is a movement of love, the second is a movement of desire. The movement of love corresponds
to the projection of divine light (jala). This projection is the manifestation (zuhur) of the divine reality
(haqq) in the form of the archetypes (a'yan). The movement of desire corresponds to reflection (istijla)
which is the return of light to its source, that is, the emanation (tajalli) of the divine beauty (jamal) in
the mirror of the spiritual realities (haqa'iq) and archetypes (a'ayn).641 The

existence of the spiritual
realities and archetypes derive from the Most Holy Emanation (Fayd-i-aqdas) which cause these
entitites to pass from the station of the Essence to the station of existence in the divine knowledge.
This existence of eternal archetypes would be a purely intelligible existence, but nevertheless
sufficient to permit each archetype to be differentiated in the mirror of the divine knowledge.

Tafsir, p. 12
Tafsir, p. 6
Tafsir, p. 11

This process would permit distinguishing between two states of the Hidden Treasure, or said
otherwise, two states of the divine Essence, corresponding in reality to two different perceptions of
man: the Hidden Treasure before the manifestation of the divine knowledge and the Hidden
Treasure afterwards, which is to say this state which some describe as “the first manifestation” or
“the second invisible” (ghayb-i-thani).642

‘Abdu’l-Baha refrains from refuting this exposition. He considers it a valid description of reality on
condition that a certain number of nuances are introduced which lead to the conclusion which we
have already described. We cannot introduce into the divine Essence any distinction whatsoever.
Thus if we say that the archetypes exist in the Essence, this can not be a real existence, no more than
we can speak of two or three “existing” in One. Then, we must avoid introducing any element into
the divine Essence which would be co-eternal with God. Thus we cannot say that the archetypes
have always existed in God, for this would return to the theory of the hypostases (qudama). It must
therefore be admitted that the archetypes are created (hadith), and if they are created, they cannot
pertain to the ontological sphere of the Essence.

All reasonings end in an impossibility of language. On the one hand, the series of propositions lead
us to admit that the archetypes have always existed in the mirror of the knowledge of God, because
knowledge is one of the eternal (qadim) attributes of God. Also, it is not

possible to conceive of knowledge without an object of knowledge (ma'lumat).643 On the other hand, to affirm that the archetypes exist in God is to affirm that the divine Essence becomes the location of accident (hawadith), which is also impossible. We thus arrive at contradictory exigencies. If the problem can not be solved in this fashion, we must then conclude that it was poorly posed. That is what ‘Abdu’l-Baha attempts, with much obligingness and subtlety, to have his interlocutor understand.

For the moment, ‘Abdu’l-Baha has demonstrated nothing. But he makes a clean sweep [tabula rasa] of the past, and, most of all, he establishes the limits of language, of the scholastic methods and of formal logic to resolve such problems. He has prepared his reader to accept conclusions which will leave behind all the frameworks of traditional thought.

4. Love as the manifestation of the divine Essence

The manner in which the Baha’i writings arrive at the passage of the world of the divine Essence to the intelligible world is essentially apophatic. We can say what the process is not, but it is difficult to say what it is. In multiple places, Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha affirm that in the origin of the world is found an unfathomable mystery which man will never penetrate.

The doctrine of Ibn al-'Arabi has an interesting aspect in that it superposes certain Neoplatonic elements to Christian elements. We have already seen in the preceding Chapters that, according to Plotinus, emanation was born of the desire which the One had to contemplate Its own essence. In Ibn al-'Arabi we also find desire and contemplation. But to the movement of desire, he superposes the movement of love, which is a specifically Christian adaptation of Neoplatonic theses. For

Tafsir, p. 10
Tafsir, p. 11

Plotinus, the movement of desire is circular in the interior of the One. In order the preserve the One from all contact with an exterior entity. For the Christians, this thesis is not acceptable, because it

posed a God totally exterior to creation. In replacing the Plotinian desire with the Christian love, they wish to make God plainly responsible for His creation. It is interesting to see Ibn al-'Arabi seeking a synthesis of these two visions. This synthesis does not hold because it leads to the contradictions put into evidence by ‘Abdu’l-Baha. It is these two contradictions which will be resolved in the second Chapter of the Tafsir consecrated to love.

This chapter on Love is an essentially mystical chapter which describes, in particular, how man can be transformed within by divine love. This aspect of the chapter is altogether outside the field of our study, so we will not speak of it. Nor will we speak of the different aspects, or “stations” of Love distinguished by ‘Abdu’l-Baha, except to say that he does no other than to represent very classical theses of Muslim mysticism which distinguish four aspects in love: the love of the divine essence for the divine essence (az jam' bi jam'), the love of the divine Essence for the creatures (az jam' bi-tafsil), the love of the creatures for the creatures (az tafsil bi-tafsil), and the love of the creatures for the divine Essence (az tafsil bi-jam'). This theme is also very briefly treated by Baha’u’llah in the “Seven Valleys”. To this classical exposition, which is but a report, ‘Abdu’l-Baha adds a complement which is the love which man has of the Beauty which is at the interior of himself. ‘Abdu’l-Baha uses this theme in order to undermine the absolute monism of Ibn al-'Arabi and a party among the Sufis — monism which tended towards a modified form of pantheism. ‘Abdu’l-Baha defends what he calls “the unity of experience” (tawhid-i-shuhudi)644 which is a unity of “state” between God and man and not a unity of essence.

Two aspects of this chapter can nevertheless retain our attention to explain the deployment of Being and the mode of existence of the spiritual realities. The first aspect, is the role which ‘Abdu’l-Baha gives to love as the organizing principle of the cosmos. This is a well-known theme in the Baha’i writings, and what ‘Abdu’l-Baha says can be supported and corroborated by many other texts. Also, we will treat this question from a general point of view without following the exposition step by step.

The other aspect concerns the indications, which are relatively isolated and dispersed throughout
the interior of the text, of the spiritual realities and entities of the Scholastics.645

5. Love, the principal organizer of the cosmos

Once more, ‘Abdu’l-Baha begins by insisting on the problem of language. Love is an intelligible
reality, [and hence] it is found “beyond language” (fawq-i-'alam-i-ahsa va bayan).646 The distinction of
four or five “stations” of love proceeds from a pure game of the spirit. One could also very well say

Tafsir, p. 18. The Persian expression tawhid-i-shuhudi is equivalent to the Arabic wahdat al-shuhud, which
Massignon translates by “testimonial monism” in contrast to “existential monism” (wahdat al-wujud).
Here for the sake of simplicity we refer to all these distinctions in the reality of beings which Persian
philosophy of the 19th century inherited from Avicennian Aristotelianism, such as the archetypes (a'yan),
quiddities (mahiyyat), eidetic forms (qabiliyyat), determinations (shu'unat) and so forth, as Scholastic entities.
We wish to avoid posing the question of the mode of being of these entities, for we might ask whether
they have an existence outside of the human spirit. This terminology is totally unsuited to describe
Baha'i philosophy, and if 'Abdu'l-Baha uses it, it is only in order to satisfy his interlocutor.
Tafsir, p. 15

that the stations of love are of infinite number, or, from another point of view, that the rank of love is
pure unity (vahdat).647

Love is not a simple attribute of God but constitutes His very nature. From this fact, the Love of
God can not be distinguished from His Essence. The problem of love and its links to the divine
Essence is in a way identical to the problem of the knowledge [of God] which ‘Abdu’l-Baha
approached in the preceding chapter [of the Tafsir]. This does not surprise us, because Baha’u’llah
explained in the “Seven Valleys” that once one has passed beyond “the world of the relative and the
limited” ('alam-i-nusbat tuqdid)648, love and knowledge do not appear except as two forces of the same

phenomenon and that their duality is transcended in the vision of unity.

Concerning this identity between love and the divine Essence, ‘Abdu’l-Baha affirms that the
manifestation of love in the divine Essence precedes the reflection of the “essential distinctions”
(shu'unat-i-dhatiyyih), which are the attributes when they are invisible, in the state of potentialities in
the Essence in the mirror of the archetypes.649 This means that, ontologically, the manifestation of
love precedes the deployment of the divine attributes.

Elsewhere, ‘Abdu’l-Baha employs the word emanation (fayd; tajalliyat) regarding love.650 We can thus
understand that love is but an aspect of the divine Verb, that is, of the Holy Spirit.

It is thus affirmed that love is a unique principle which is at the base of creation, because it was
because He wanted to be loved and known that God created the world. Furthermore, we can affirm
that love is the organizing and structuring principle of the cosmos. All the relations between the
elements and ultimately the laws of the universe, can be interpreted as a manifestation of the unique
[and] fundamental law which is universal love. ‘Abdu’l-Baha says, in occurrence, that the force
which maintains the unity of the particles of an atom, the force of gravity which attracts objects to
the center of the earth, are nothing other than manifestations of this universal law.

This leads ‘Abdu’l-Baha to define love in non-psychological terms. Love is something other than a
simple expansion of the heart. Love is the effect which results from the force of attraction between
things. ‘Abdu’l-Baha employs the word “magnetism” (maghnatis) to describe it.651 This magnetism is
the fruit of the divine Beauty (jamal) which is, at the same time, perfection (kamal).652 The principle of
the world is that all things must tend towards perfection and all things must aspire to Beauty. God is
the supreme Beauty; it is for this reason that everything on the surface of the earth is attracted
towards the center of the planet by the law of gravity. Love is thus the organizing principle of the
universe.653

AQA:III:120; SV:27
Tafsir, p. 12
Tafsir, p. 14
Tafsir, p. 15
Tafsir, p. 16
This conclusion is a synthesis between what 'Abdu'l-Baha says about Love in the Tafsir and what he
says in Some Answered Questions as well as in his talks in North America.

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At the same time, the duality born of the movement of love and desire of the theories of Ibn al-
'Arabi disappears. Love leads everything to unity. ‘Abdu’l-Baha speaks of a “magnetism of unicity”
(maghnatis-i-ahadiyyih).654

The love which God has of His own beauty is the source of all other forms of love.655 The essence of
love is one. The difference between the love of God and the other forms of love is that this does not
have need of a place (majali) of of the mirror of the contingent (ka'inat) creatures in order to manifest
itself.656

6. The mode of existence of the essences and their transparent character

In order to precisely identify the mode of existence of the Scholastic entities, we must return to the
framework of transparent theology which we evoked in the preceding chapters. ‘Abdu’l-Baha
indicates that one of the ways to resolve this problem consists in considering the Essence of God as a
mirror for Himself and that this mirror represents the divine knowledge as the seminal purpose of
things (shu'unat-i-dhatiyyih). This divine knowledge is reflected in its turn in the mirror of the
archetypes (a'yan).657 This is a very elegant way of resolving the problem of divine knowledge which
so troubled the Muslim philosophers. In this context, we can understand divine knowledge like a
simple human perspective, a metaphorical expression, a problem of human language and of hearing
which is condemned by its own mode of functioning to establish this kind of distinction. However,
that which is reflected in the archetypes is not the Essence of God, but rather His knowledge, which
is to say the image which exists in the mirror of Himself. Following ‘Abdu’l-Baha, the link which

unites the “distinctions” and the “archetypes” is a transparent bond of light — light being the metaphorical expression of the capacity of divine knowledge to project itself in things. And he adds that this light is nothing other than the manifestation of Love, which is to say of the divine Verb, the Holy Spirit. We find here once more this equation which in all of the metaphysic of Baha’u’llah poses a fundamental equality between the Love and the Knowledge of God, and which implies that in man love and knowledge must become unified in order to arrive at the true knowledge that one finds in what Baha’u’llah calls the “Valley of Unity”.658

Beneath these archetypes (a'yan) are found other entities which are the quiddities (mahiyyat)xxv and the spiritual realities (haqa'iq). Little does ‘Abdu’l-Baha evoke the problem of quiddities and we can sense that he regards these artificial distinctions as a burdensome heritage from the scholasticism from which he hopes to disengage himself. Here again, he resolves the problem with much elegance.

The quiddities [mahiyyat], if we restrict ourselves to the meaning of the word such as it was defined by Scholasticism, are part of the intelligible realities which only have an existence in the human spirit, like the mathematical entities of which we spoke at the beginning of this Chapter. But this word takes on multiple meanings in the writings of Baha’u’llah which does not reflect the usages of

Tafsir, p. 15
Tafsir, p. 13
Tafsir, p. 16
Tafsir, p. 12
AQA:III:109-122; SV:17-29

Aristotelian Scholasticism. It happens that ‘Abdu’l-Baha speaks of the quiddities as an intermediary category between the archetypes (a'yan), which are but an aspect of the divine attributes considered in the sphere of Lahut, and the spiritual realities (haqa'iq) which belong to the sphere of Malakut. Thus, ‘Abdu’l-Baha speaks of the quiddities in association with Jabarut659, which has nothing to do with the original philosophical meaning of the word. In our view, the distinction

between the Essence and
the quiddity of things plays no role whatsoever in the metaphysic of
Baha'u'llah. It is a term
borrowed from peripatetic philosophy which 'Abdu'l-Baha uses here, in a
sense inflected by Ibn
Sina and Ibn al-'Arabi, simply in order to respect the vocabulary in usage in
the theological schools.
In no case do we need to regard the quiddities as having an existence distinct
and separable from
the reality of things.

To take up again the thread of the Tafsir, that which distinguishes the
archetypes (a'yan) from the
spiritual realities (haqa'iq) is that the spiritual realities only exist in
association with a contingent
reality. With every contingent creature is associated a spiritual reality,
which in fact constitutes its
deepest nature.660 The spiritual reality of man, for example, is symbolized by
his heart.

Spiritual realities are transparent entities which have the capacity to be
illumined by divine love. It is
upon the spiritual reality of man, the reality which inhabits Malakut, that
divine love exercises its
power of magnetic attraction.661

7. The question of the adventitiousness of the essential realities

The remainder of the Tafsir affords little supplementary information. The third
chapter treats
creation, but in fact, it approaches the question of the foundations of a
theory of the spiritual noetic.
The last chapter, entitled "Of knowledge" concludes that because knowledge
of the divine Essence is
impossible, then man can not know Divinity except through divine revelation.662

The chapter on creation begins with the question of whether the Scholastic
entities are eternal or if
they were created. But 'Abdu'l-Baha refuses to settle the question and
declares that to reply with
"yes" or "no" is but a question of point of view. This is a purely
formal question which essentially
depends upon the perspective in which one places oneself and which, in any
case, can not be
resolved through dialectic663. Here, 'Abdu'l-Baha remains faithful to the
phenomenological
principle enunciated by Baha'u'llah in the "Seven Valleys" according to
which the differences which
the wayfarer perceives between the divine worlds derives from the condition of

the wayfarer and not
from these worlds.664 Consequently, the contradictions which we note between the declarations of
the mystic saints (awliya) come from the differences which are engendered among the different divine
attributes when they are reflected in them.665
Tafsir, p. 19
Tafsir, p. 16
Tafsir, p. 15
Ibid.
Tafsir, pp. 39-40
SV:18,19,21,28
Tafsir, p. 40

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However, before arriving at this conclusion, ‘Abdu’l-Baha reviews the arguments of the different
schools concerning the created or uncreated character of the Scholastic entities (thesis of
adventicity). Probably he was not convinced of the pertinence of the question, but before arriving at
his very relativistic conclusion he demonstrates a perfect knowledge of the arguments of the different
schools. We do not follow ‘Abdu’l-Baha through this terrain, and we content ourselves with
summarizing the essentials of his argument.

‘Abdu’l-Baha begins with the arguments of those who believe in the eternity of the Scholastic
entities, which is to say, essentially al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. These ones advanced two arguments.
The first is that a knowledge without object of knowledge is impossible. But knowledge is an
attribute of God. Consequently the realities which are reflected in the mirror of divine knowledge
are eternal, even as divine knowledge is eternal; otherwise there would have been a moment in
which the knowledge of God could not have been perfect.666

The second argument is taken from the Mu'tazili doctrine upon the free will and justice of God. If
God is just, the universe is not governed by any determinism and choice exists between good and
evil. Consequently, God created all realities with equal potentialities, without any pre-established
determinism (ijbar), no compulsive force (ikrah).667

But, as it is stated that realities occupy different ranks, either this

difference is explained by a
determinism or a compulsive force—which has just been excluded—or it is explained by the fact
that realities have not been created equal, which has also been excluded. Consequently, ‘Abdu’l-
Baha concludes that we must deduce that it is the idea of creation of these realities which is contrary
to the justice of God and the liberty of creation.

This kind of problem can seem to be completely surpassed today. But we must not forget that here
we are touching on the theses and the problems which constitute the foundations of classical Muslim
philosophy. Addressing them is thus an important step in the constitution of an autonomous Baha’i
philosophy. ‘Abdu’l-Baha altogether joins modern philosophy when he expresses his doubts on the
possibility of finding satisfactory responses to such problems through logic as our only resource. We
must not forget that classical Muslim philosophy had absolute confidence that metaphysical
questions could be resolved through logical reasoning. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, pointing to the circular
reasoning of the Scholastics, attempts to demonstrate that the philosophical problem resides less in
the logical methods which are utilized than in the manner in which the problem is posed. And,
every problem posed in relation to the Essence of God can only receive a relative response. The
theorem of Godel does not say otherwise. If we pose God as an absolute, the rules of logic would
have to be defined in relation to a rationality founded upon a larger absolute, capable of
understanding in itself the reality of God, if we were to wish that these [rules] might teach us
anything about the divine reality. This approach explains the method of ‘Abdu’l-Baha which
consists in demonstrating that the two opposed theses are based upon equally valid logical
reasonings.

It is thus that ‘Abdu’l-Baha turns to the examination of the Adventist thesis, which affirms that the

Tafsir, p. 24
Tafsir, p. 25

Scholastic entities were created. And he demonstrates with the same aplomb the theses which are
contrary to those just discussed. He advances four arguments, which we will not [cite in] detail.
These arguments are based on the postulate that divine knowledge does not reside in an object
(ma'lumat).668 Here we recognize the thesis of Ibn al-'Arabi.

To demonstrate this thesis, ‘Abdu’l-Baha uses two arguments which must be his own, because we
find them elsewhere, be it in the Tafsir, be it in other works. The first argument is that of the unicity
of the [divine] attributes. There is no Essence without knowledge and no knowledge independent of
the Essence, an consequently to associate with [divine] knowledge a co-eternal object of knowledge
is to return to the thesis of the hypostases (qudama). The other argument relates once more to
language. To speak of the “knowledge” of God is a purely metaphorical use of the word
“knowledge”. The divine Essence with which [divine] knowledge is identified is far beyond human
language and comprehension. To speak of the “knowledge” of God supposes that there exists at
least relation of similarity between this “knowledge” and the process of human comprehension,
which is not the case here. In the world of contingency, we cannot conceive of knowledge without
an object of knowledge, but in the world of transcendence, the divine knowledge is free from such
limitations. The transparent character of the knowledge of God conceived of as a mirror of the
divine Essence excludes all relation between this knowledge and an object exterior to this
knowledge. Man cannot picture to himself the knowledge of God. He can not even have an idea of
it, for to know or imagine the knowledge of God would imply knowing His Essence. We would say
that knowledge is inherent to the anthropic Spirit; it constitutes a particularity thereof. But as it
unites man to God, we attribute it also to God for we must suppose that there is something in
common between the creature and its Creator, even if it is a distant and essentially homological link.
Said otherwise, we ascribe knowledge to God, for otherwise it is we who could not know Him.

Following the proofs of the adventicity (hadith) of the Scholastic entities,

‘Abdu’l-Baha takes up the theses of Aristotle on form and matter. Of course, these are the theses of Aristotle as they were known to classical Muslim philosophy, that is, as understood by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. ‘Abdu’l-Baha prudently names nobody, falling back upon an impersonal plural in order to report these positions.

The argument essentially aims at demonstrating that form and substance were created at the same time.669 This argument is important because it shows that in the thought of ‘Abdu’l-Baha, the intelligible realities do not have an existence independent of the sensible realities. To distinguish form from substance can have no ontological interest unless each can exist independently of the other. In this sense, the thought of ‘Abdu’l-Baha goes well beyond that of Aristotle and Ibn Sina.

Two theories of Aristotle intervene here: on the one hand the theory of being in power and of being in act, and on the other hand the theory of form and matter. The elaboration of these ideas is made essentially in reaction to the theses of Plato on the world of Ideas. Aristotle here wishes to show that the essences of things, which he calls “quiddities”, are not eternal substances and that one can not found the existence of the particular being upon the principle of the division which reduces each being to a kind and to a class which pre-existed it. Aristotle considers that the essence (ousia) is the

Tafsir, p. 28
Tafsir, p. 35

true being; it is the first principle without there being anything above this.

Aristotle considers that Being can manifest itself in two modes: either Being exists in power, or Being exists in act. For example, the statue exists in power in the block of marble. The act is the work or the function which causes the Being in power to pass to the completed form (entelechi). The passage of the Being in power to the Being in act is effected by the union of a form to being one in power, which is what Aristotle calls matter (hylee in Greek; hayula in Arabic).

‘Abdu’l-Baha here applies the theory of Being in power (ayniyyat) and of Being in action (fa'aliyyat) to divine knowledge and he remarks that this explains the difference in point of view between those who say that knowledge is identical with the Essence—for these ones speak of knowledge in power—and those who speak of knowledge in its interdependency with the object of knowledge— for they speak of knowledge in action.670

If ‘Abdu’l-Baha seems to take into consideration this distinction, he attributes the rest of the development on form and substance to an impersonal “he” the true identity of whom it is difficult to identify with precision. The ideas which are discussed here are in appearance one of the multiple versions of the peripatetic theory of form and substance, but it is a peripatetism adapted and revised according to platonistic elements. The development apparently does not aim at Ibn Sina, because Ibn Sina believed in the eternity of the forms and quiddities, although it is affirmed here that the School we are considering defends an Adventist position. Nor can it derives from Ibn al-'Arabi, because the technical terms employed are used in a context which is situated in opposition to the definitions given by Ibn al-'Arabi. ‘Abdu’l-Baha opposes the word qabil—which we have translated up until now by “form”—to maqbul, which designates “that which receives form”. Qabil is thus the active principle and maqbul the passive principle. Thus we translate the first term by the word “receptacle”, for qabil is that which receives the divine effusion.671 For Ibn al-'Arabi, God created the world first as a substance without form (musawwi), that is, having no qualitative determination. At this stage, the world was like a mirror which had not yet been polished. This primordial substance is qabil which was created by the Most Holy Emanation (al-fayd al-aqdas) which transmits with it the eternal archetypes (al-a'yan al-thabita).672

If thus the development aims neither at Ibn Sina nor at Ibn al-'Arabi, it will for future writers to identify the school aimed at here. Perhaps it is a philosopher of the School of Isfahan who will have to be identified by name. Nor can we exclude the possibility that ‘Abdu’l-Baha had proceeded with

revisions of the vocabulary. This shows that it will be one day necessary to proceed with the
systematic comparison of the thought of Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha with that of the philosophers,
such as Ibn al-'Arabi, Mulla Sadra and Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i in order to resolve a number of
problems which still persist in our comprehension of the Baha’i writings.

Ibid.
Ibn al-'Arabi, La sagesse des prophetes, pp. 23,26,45,72
The diversity of rendering which we encounter in translating the expression al-a'yan al-thabita illustrates
the difficulty in translating Arabic philosophical terms. A.E. Afifi, in “The mystical philosophy of Muhyid-din
ibnu'l-Arabi” translates it with “possible things”. Corbin speaks of “eternal hecceity”. Other authors,
[notably] Burckhardt, translate the expression with “immutable essence”. We translate it by “eternal
archetype” without this expression being entirely satisfactory.

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According to the votaries of this School with unknown identity, the eidetic forms (qabiliyyat) and the
receptive substances (maqbulat) were created simultaneously, inasmuch as all things are composed of
a form (qabil) and a receptive substance (maqbul)673, which is nothing other than common matter
(maddih) or the primordial substance (hayula). Qabil can then be identified with the images (surat) and
the eternal forms (hay'at).674

Up to here, the text is very close to Aristotle, and we discern very little platonist influence, which
relates this passage to the commentaries of Averroes (Ibn Rushd).

Then, ‘Abdu’l-Baha introduces a distinction between the particular form (hay'at-i-makhsusih), and the
particular substance (maddiy-i-makhsusih), which he contrasts with the general substance (maddiy-i-
kulliyyih). If, for example, with a pen and ink, we write a letter, this letter is composed upon the paper
in a form which is distinct and particular to itself, and in a substance, ink, which is also distinct and
particular. However, if we recognize the letter and if we are capable of reading it, it is because we
relate the particular form to the general form which is contained in the alphabet. The general form
thus preexisted in the alphabet, even as the substance, that is to say the ink,

preexisted in the ink
well. ‘Abdu’l-Baha then takes up the same argument of Being in power and Being in action which
he applied to the knowledge of God. When the pen traces the letter on the paper, the form and
substance are created, in the same manner that the Scholastic entities were created for the partisans
of the Adventist theory. But when we consider the ink in the ink well and the letters of the alphabet,
we then see that the form and substance preexisted as is affirmed by the partisans of the eternal
existence of the Scholastic entities. Here ‘Abdu’l-Baha entirely parts company with Aristotle,
because for Aristotle, on the one hand, the general does not proceed from the particular, and on the
other hand, the act is ontologically anterior to the power. Thus, Being undefined could not exist. All
these considerations permit ‘Abdu’l-Baha to arrive at the conclusion that the eidetic forms (qabiliyyat)
and the receptive substances (maqbulat) were necessarily created simultaneously.675 But if undefined
Being cannot not independently exist, the bases of classical ontology, be they Greek, Muslim or
Christian, are thereby ruined. Indeed, we are not far from nominalism, but it would be an error to
assimilate this position to Ockamist nominalism, for neither its bases, nor its consequences, are the
same.

8. Ontology and language

Having thus assembled all the elements of the Tafsir which relate to ontology, we must now attempt
to make a synthesis from them.

The first element which comes forth, is the role which ‘Abdu’l-Baha gives to language in general,
and the particular utilization which he makes of logic. Language is a product of the sensible world.
But, of the sensible world language permits us only to understand mathematical realities (ahsa) and
certain intellectual realities, such as Nature, but it does not permit us to understand spiritual realities
[haqa'iq], as, for example, Love. Among these spiritual realities, there are some the intuitive

Once more we must renounce an exact translation of the Arabic terms.
Tafsir, pp. 36-37
Tafsir, p. 37

perception of which is immediate, but others are themselves beyond the intuition of man, because
intuition remains based on empirical experience. To speak of these spiritual realities, man has no
other recourse than to take on the way of analogy (tamthil). Thus, our comprehension of the spiritual
world is limited by experience of the sensible world. ‘Abdu’l-Baha has no more confidence in logic.
Logic can sometimes produce an irreproachable reasoning, without this necessarily being a gauge of
truth, from the moment that the givens which are put into play are no longer empirical givens.

His refusal to settle things between the positions of the different Schools, is it a real refusal? It is
probably only so in part. In affirming that the differences of opinions between the philosophical and
mystical schools are derived from differences of perspective, he shows at the same time the worthless
character of their debates and the absence of real stakes.

Did ‘Abdu’l-Baha consider the Scholastic entities enumerated as the archetypes, the essential forms,
the quiddities, the spiritual realities and the qualifications as having a real existence independent of
man, or only as distinctions between the logical categories of the human spirit? It seems to be
difficult to reply to this question, without doubt because there is not a comprehensive response, and
that we would have to take up all of these terms in order to carry out a specific study of each one of
them. If ‘Abdu’l-Baha uses these terms, it is above all because these are the terms in usage in the
theological schools of his time, and because these are those which his interlocutor uses, who
probably furnished him with a written list of questions and thus already partially predetermined the
vocabulary. If we now turn to the writings of Baha’u’llah, we will find that he himself employed all
of these terms. In the same fashion, all the terms are not employed with the same frequency. Haqiqat
(reality) and haqa'iq (spiritual realities) are expressions which are employed with a great frequency.
A'yan (archetypes), shu'unat (potential qualities, qualifications) and mahiyyat (quiddities) are very rarely
used in the rest of the works of Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha. It is

probable that for him, only the spiritual realities constitute independent realities. The others are purely intellectual distinctions, if we hold to the definitions of Scholastic philosophy. However, in Baha'u'llah we find another usage of these terms which is totally distinct from the Scholastic definitions and which employs this vocabulary be it to distinguish different ontological modes among the spiritual realities, or be it to qualify certain hermeneutic functions when we are in the context of the "divine worlds".

9. The essential degrees

What is very striking, is the very imprecise character of the vocabulary of 'Abdu'l-Baha. At one moment he speaks as if the archetypes (a'yan), the spiritual realities (haqa'iq) and the quiddities (mahiyyat) constitute one and the same category, itself contained in the larger category of the potential qualities (shu'unat). But, if we collect all of the information which the Tafsir gives us on the shu'unat, we must define them as the latent or virtual state in the essence of an idea, of a form, or of an intelligible reality which constitutes an attribute or a property of this essence and a potential differentiation of the first reality.

Based on this definition, even for a philosopher, it is difficult to determine so as to know if the shu'unat have a purely intellectual existence, or if they constitute intelligible beings independent from the human spirit.

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In another place676, 'Abdu'l-Baha tells us that the mahiyyat (quiddities), qabiliyyat (eidetic forms), and a'yan (archetypes) are [all] part of the same category of spiritual realities (haqa'iq), leaving it to be understood either that all these terms designated a single reality, or that these are related realities all of which can be grouped together in the category of "spiritual realities". Is there a contradiction here, or should we understand that the haqa'iq and shu'unat are synonymous terms? Once more, we note the fluid character of vocabulary in the work of 'Abdu'l-Baha as in the work of Baha'u'llah, and we have already explained the reasons for this.

In fact, if we refer to the usage of this vocabulary by Baha'u'llah, we see that only two terms have a real importance: the shu'unat and the haqa'iq.

Indications about the shu'unat are furnished for us by Baha'u'llah in the collection of the Munajat. An attentive study of the vocabulary shows us that he utilizes the word in different contexts. On the one hand, he speaks of the divine power (shu'unati qudratika).677 The term then seems to characterize the deployment of divine power, [and] we could render it "exemplification". It qualifies the process by which divine power, in power within the divine Essence, passes into action in the reality of things through its descent into the different divine worlds.

Another usage is that which links the shu'unat to the sensible world. Baha'u'llah speaks of the shu'unat of creation (khalq)678, or the shu'unat of Nasut 679. By this, it seems that he wishes to designate the ranks and the degrees by which the sensible creatures are distinguished from one another. But, these ranks and these degrees are nothing more than the passage into action of what was contained in the Essence, which is to say, the manifestation in the sensible world (mulk; nasut) of their reality in Malakut.

These two uses have one thing in common. They mark the passage of one ontological sphere to another. In one case, it is the divine power which, emanating from the world of Lahut, is manifested in the worlds of Jabarut and Malakut. In the second case, it is the manifestation of the attributes of the Essence, that is of the passage from the intelligible world to the sensible world.

10. The spiritual realities

The word haqiqat (pl. haqa'iq) covers a concept which is much easier to define. The term is generally rendered by "reality" or "essence". The usage of the word "essence" has the inconvenience of being mistaken for the Aristotelian term, or to reintroduce the definitions of medieval Scholasticism. Hence we must also advance with a great deal of prudence in our attempts at definition.

What appears to be certain is that the spiritual realities (haqa'iq) are found in the hierarchy of the

divine worlds between the Essence of God (Lahut) and the sensible world (mulk). Should we
understand that the spiritual realities are only intelligible realities
(ma'qulat)? It is here that our

Tafsir, p. 26
See for example Munajat, #32, p. 36; #56, p. 61; #63, p. 73
Munajat, #44, p. 48
Munajat, #38, p. 40

concept of “intellectual” ('aqli) realities intervenes. Intellectual
realities are intelligible realities which
do not exist independently of man. The distinction between essence and
existence is an example of
intellectual realities. Spiritual realities (haqa'iq), [on the other hand],
exist independently of man, such
as for example, the charge of the electron or the love of God.

We see here that the conception of “spiritual realities” cannot be
understood in the framework of
duality which opposes the intelligible worlds to the sensible world. All the
spiritual realities are
intelligible realities (but not intellectual). However, not all have the same
relation of spiritual
independence from the sensible world.

11. The unity of the creaturely world

In order to understand well the notion of spiritual reality, we must stop
opposing the intelligible
world to the sensible world, so as to grasp the unity of the “creaturely
world” ('alam al-khalq).680 It is
this unity which we have defined as Pleroma. In fact, only God and His creation
exist, and the
creation of God must be understood like a entelechi, a perfect transparent
reality, embracing all of the
infinite worlds. The sensible world is but a small part of the creaturely world
which is infinite in
itself.

The soul is a spiritual reality. In the course of our terrestrial life, [the
soul] is linked to the sensible
world, even though its reality never leaves Malakut. Furthermore, the soul
survives the disappearance
of the body, which signifies clearly that its existence can have a character
independent from the
sensible world. This survival is the sign that the creaturely world encompasses
all of the worlds and

all of the ontological spheres which are outside of the divine Essence, as well as this intermediary
world which Baha’u’llah calls the World of Revelation of the World of Command (amr). The
spiritual world of Malakut like the sensible world is a part thereof, along with Jabarut, when it is not
identified with the World of Revelation.

Certain spiritual realities seem to be attached to the sensible world. In fact, to each sensible reality
there correspond one or several spiritual realities. The spiritual reality of a thing constitutes its
eternal principle which is beyond the accidents of form and matter. However we must not confuse
the world of spiritual realities with the world of essences. The metaphysic of Baha’u’llah is neither a
metaphysic of essence, nor a metaphysic of existence. Essence and Being constitute one and the
same reality. We can not consider Being outside of the Existence of a contingency (mumkina) attached
to a contingent (ka'in) entity. Being is the property of that which is engendered. Never does
Baha’u’llah rank Existence (wujud) at the rank of the divine attributes.681

If the spiritual realities can be attached to the sensible world, is it possible that the spiritual realities
may be the forms and the images which populate the Imaginal World? We will now try to respond
to this question.

Baha'u'llah calls “the creaturely world”, “the contingent world” ('alam al-mumkinat).
Munajat, #38, p. 38. Baha'u'llah distinguishes Being or Existence (wujud), which is the property of
“beings” (mawjudat), which is to say the creatures, from the mode of Being of God, which he designates
by the term “kaynuna” which unfortunately is untranslatable. Perhaps we could speak of “existentiality”
or of “essentiality” (from the Latin esse, to be).

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:
THE IMAGINAL WORLD

Now that we have examined the “Commentary on the Hidden Treasure”, we have been able to
note the extreme reserve of ‘Abdu’l-Baha towards what we have called the vocabulary of the
Scholastic entities. It is visible that this vocabulary seemed to be

inappropriate to describe his thinking; its definitions were too imprecise, its distinctions too numerous. In speaking of the relation between the form (qabil) and the receptacle of that form (maqbul), ‘Abdu’l-Baha remarks, seemingly in order to distance himself from an overly Aristotelian concept which is inappropriate to describe Baha’i thought, that this terminology of form (qabil) and of the receptacle (maqbul), and the theory which is subjacent to it, are equivalent to the images (hay'at) and to the forms (suwar) which permit the undifferentiated matter to pass from this state of undifferentiation to the sensible state.682 We will take this remark as the point of departure for our investigation of the Imaginal World.

Baha’u’llah defined the Imaginal World as the first degree of “substantification” or of “coalescence” (taqyid), and we also know from the “Tablet of Wisdom” that this Imaginal World is close to the “primordial Nature” which Socrates discovered in the reality of things. We will make use of these first elements as the live wire to attempt to define what Baha’u’llah calls “the Imaginal World” and the place of this Imaginal World in his metaphysic.

1. The images, the forms and the spiritual realities

The elements which we have collected on the Imaginal World from the writings of Baha’u’llah are unfortunately too few to permit us to determine the exact place of this world in his thought, and its relation to the Imaginal World in the Ishraqi School. However, if we accept the hypothesis of an “Imaginal World”, we must determine what it is. And there is no doubt that the images (hay'at) and the forms (suwar) that, according to ‘Abdu’l-Baha, populate this Imaginal World, belong to a category of spiritual realities (haqa'iq) or at least to that of intelligible realities inasmuch as they are conceptual realities. This implies that these spiritual realities must be hierarchized in function of their ontological status in the world in which they are found.

In fact, if we return to what seems to be the most profound thought in the writings of Baha’u’llah, there exists a continuum from the world of Lahut to the world of Nasut. The distinction that we

establish between them is purely human. Each one of these worlds interpenetrates all of the
others. The indissoluble relations that tie [together] the Pleroma render them indissociable; even
as, for example, we can not dissociate the Love of God from His Knowledge or from His Will.
Each of these worlds is at the same time the mirror which receives the light of the world which is
found above it, and the luminary which illumines, through the Holy Spirit, the world which is
found below it. The spiritual realities of each one of these worlds are all the mirrors which reflect
the light appropriate to each world. Finally, there exists in the creaturely world but one reality
which is that of the attributes of God. The spiritual realities are but the degrees which permit the

Tafsir, pp. 35-36

divine attributes to reflect themselves from mirrors in mirrors [ultimately] to the sensible world.
Consequently, to distinguish between the archetypes (a'ayn), the eidetic forms (qabiliyyat), and the
quiddities (mahiyyat), is nothing but a pure game of the spirit, which dissimulates the unicity of
these spiritual realities. Each of these entities is but the particular manifestation, on a specific
ontological plan, of the divine attributes. Each one constitutes a sha'an, a "degree".683 We must
not confuse this thesis with that of Ibn al-'Arabi on the unicity of Being (wahdat al-wujud). Being is
not a concept which can be applied to God. God is beyond Being and Existence. All existential
concepts are appropriate to the creature, as Plotinus already noted, who took care to place the
One above the Being that it engendered. This is a point about which the Muslim philosophers
were generally unaware. The existence of the divine attributes is also infinitely distanced from the
existence of beings (mawjudat). Consequently, when we say that in creation only the attributes of
God exist, this does not at all imply the existential fusion of the [divine] attributes with the
beings. The beings are like the shadow of the divine attributes and Names. Between the shadow
and the object there exists an almost infinite difference of nature. The shadow

can be considered
as non-existent in relation to the object, but in relation to our consciousness its existence is no less
objective, for it [our consciousness] is not free from the domain of illusion. In the same way, the
existence of the beings is contingent to such a point that it can, from a certain point of view, be
considered non-existence. Nevertheless, from the objective point of view that is that of our
consciousness their existence is no less real.

This idea is suggested in the Tafsir, which seems to link each of the three existential terms to a
particular ontological and spiritual plan.

The employment of this vocabulary in the Tafsir presents the same characteristics as in the work
of Baha'u'llah. There we find all of the lexical levels which we have described in the first
Chapters of our study, as, for example, the opposition of the couple Lahut-Nasut or Malakut
conceived as the expression of the divine "power" as in the Qur'an, or as the hegemony of things.
Thus 'Abdu'l-Baha speaks of the "Malakut of the names" (Malakut al-asma) which does not
designate Malakut itself, but the deployment of the divine attributes in the whole of the spiritual
worlds.684 In the prologue to the Tafsir, 'Abdu'l-Baha speaks of the fulfillment (mukamal) of the
Verb at the level of Lahut and then its descent by the station of unicity (tardid) to the level of the
"eternal Jabarut".685 He adds that from this level [Lahut], the spiritual realities (haqa'iq) and the
archetypes (a'yan) are manifested at the level of the "Malakut of creation" (bada'iyya).686

In the chapter which 'Abdu'l-Baha consecrates to Love, which is, we must not forget, the cause
of divine creation, he distinguishes five "stations" (maqamat) of Love. This question was long
debated by the Muslim mystics. But these ones distinguished four stations and not five. Love is
the link which unites man to God as much as men to each other. Love does not manifest itself
except in the plan of human creation. For this reason, it is because of the love of God for man
that He created the world. The Love of God for man, which supposes the existence of the

anthropic Spirit, thus preexisted the creation of man. In the “Hidden Words”, God declares to

Tafsir, p. 5. Sha'an is the singular of the double plural shu'unat (sing. sha'an; plur. shu'un).
Tafsir, p. 5
Tafsir, p. 5
Tafsir, n.p.

man:

“O son of man! Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.”687

‘Abdu’l-Baha, distancing himself from tradition, distinguishes a fifth station of Love, which is the love of the Lover for the divine beauty which is in himself.688 Man carries within himself the trace of his Creator, Imago Dei689 which is the divine deposit constituted by the reflection of the divine Names and attributes in his soul. ‘Abdu’l-Baha says that this station, that is to say this Imago Dei, was created from elements ('unsur) coming from Lahut.690 Probably he means to say that it is a pure manifestation of the divine attributes. This image of God in man thus constitutes an element that attaches man not to Malakut, as we could have expected, but directly to Lahut, to the world of the divine Essence. Man is thus never cut off from his Creator notwithstanding the infinite transcendence of God. ‘Abdu’l-Baha continues in saying that the spiritual realities (haqa'iq) of Malakut and the quiddities (mahiyyat) of Jabarut have never themselves breathed the breezes of the Paradise of Unicity (ahadiyyat), nor the breaths of ipseity (huviyyat: which is the say the Essence of God).691 A little further on, he returns to the world of Lahut which He describes as the world of reality or of the divine Essence (haqiqat).692 The spiritual realities and quiddities are thus realities which are situated outside of the sphere of the divine Essence and His attributes.

Finally, returning to the problem of creation, ‘Abdu’l-Baha once more situates the archetypes

(a'yan) and the spiritual realities (haqa'iq) at the level of Malakut.693 All of these indications can
appear to be contradictory. We will show that they correspond to a fairly precise scheme.

2. The hermeneutic scheme of the deployment of the essences

Based on the citations we have encountered, we can outline a scheme which probably only has a
metaphorical and hermeneutic value, even if these metaphysical implications are not negligible.
To the world of Lahut corresponds the divine Verb (kalamat) in its undifferentiated aspect (tamat).
This divine Verb is nothing other than the perfect Love or the divine Essence manifested in His
attributes.

To the world of Jabarut correspond the quiddities (mahiyyat). This word is mysterious. We must
probably forget the literal meaning, which designates the qualities that belong to an essence,

AHW: #3
Tafsir, pp. 14, 19
Genesis 1:26,27
Tafsir, p. 19
Tafsir, p. 20
Tafsir, p. 21? Baha'u'llah distinguishes ipseity (huwiyya), which is the unmanifested Essence of God,
corresponding to Hahut, from the Essence manifested in His attributes (haqiqat), which corresponds to the
level of Lahut.
Tafsir, p. 24

qualities which makes this essence what it is. The word no doubt indicates, in this context, that at
the interior of this reality is already manifested a state of differentiation which is the sign of latent
multiplicity (kithra). The quiddity is nothing but the reflection of the divine attributes in a mirror
that permits this greater degree of differentiation and multiplicity.

Finally, Malakut is the world of archetypes (a'yan) and of spiritual realities (haqa'iq). It is probable
that we should not pay too much attention here to the use of two words. These two words are a
doublet which we may consider as synonymous terms. We can summarize this system by the

following table:

Lahut	—	Verb; Love; manifested Essence (haqiqat)
Jabarut	—	Quiddities (mahiyyat)
Malakut	—	Spiritual realities (haqa'iq); Archetypes (a'yan)

It is interesting to compare this table with the one we have placed at the end of Chapter V and which derived from a text of Baha'u'llah. The differences which we distinguish therein are perfectly explained in the framework of the definitions that we have given in the present Chapter.

It shows that the term "spiritual reality" can be employed with two different meanings. In the text of Baha'u'llah cited in Chapter V, the word is used in its hermeneutic sense. Haqa'iq thus designates the product of gnosis, the result of the intellection of man when he seeks to apprehend the divine Essence. Not being able to directly perceive the Essence, he perceives the "haqa'iq" ("verities"). It is these "verities" that illumine the soul of man and produce "true knowledge" (ma'rifat). Of course, these haqa'iq have a close relation with the divine attributes, because it is from the Imago Dei, from the reflection in him of the attributes and thus their illumination, that man "understands" these divine "verities". 'Abdu'l-Baha, on the other hand, uses the word in its metaphysical sense. This is why the haqa'iq descend from the level of Lahut to the level of Malakut.

We cannot emphasize enough the importance of context for understanding the meanings of words in this kind of literature.694

3. The spiritual realities of the Imaginal World

This brings us to the conclusion that we cannot identify the spiritual realities with the Imaginal World except in very particular cases, and that generally the expression "spiritual realities" designates either the intelligible entities that populate Malakut, or the intelligible realities that populate the divine worlds as a whole and which correspond to the deployment of the attributes of God.

Nevertheless, a re-reading of the Tafsir together with the Tablet of Varqa permits us to better clarify the status of the "images" (hay'at) and the "forms" (suwar) as

particular realities of the Imaginal
World. That which characterizes these forms, is that they were created at the same time as
matter. We can thus say that their existence is indissociable from the sensible reality they
accompany. They only constitute a hidden “dimension”. This concept of the Imaginal World is
totally different from that of Ibn Sina, of Suhrawardi, of the Ishraqis like Mulla Sadra, or even of
Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i. That is a fundamental problem for the history of philosophy that it would
PUP:459,460

be fitting one day to examine.

4. The imaginal realities and the cosmic laws

The second aspect that we can denote in our texts, is that these forms intervene in the state of
substantification or of coalescence (taqyid) at the point of junction between the sensible world and
the intelligible world. These forms must therefore be an intelligible reality distributed in matter,
and this intelligible reality is none other than the exemplification of the divine attributes. And, if
we recall what ‘Abdu’l-Baha said about Love as the law of the cosmos, thus as the nature of
intelligible realities, we can now glimpse that these forms of the Imaginal World are nothing but
the laws of the universe, as much of the physical universe as the spiritual universe, because we
have seen that the two worlds are ruled by the same body of laws which are manifested upon
different levels. They are the “abstractions” which underlie the reality of things and rule the
universe, and which are themselves the expression of the first Nature of things, spiritual principles
which are born of the Primal Will in order to descend throughout all the degrees of the divine
worlds. We should remember how ‘Abdu’l-Baha explains that the law of love takes a form
particular and adapted to each of the worlds of creation, and that he gives the example of the
mineral world in which the law of love is transformed to become the power of attraction which
links together the molecules and the atoms; which is to say in modern language the strong and

weak atomic forces.695 This example can furnish us with a paradigm which can be generalized in
order to understand the passage between intelligible and spiritual reality and sensible reality.
When ‘Abdu’l-Baha speaks of the intelligible realities which constitute heat, light, electricity or
magnetism696, he does not wish to speak of the molecular agitation which produces a source of
energy, or of the emission of photons which are in fact sensible realities; but of the inner reality of
these phenomena. We know that beyond matter, which forms a first level of reality, is found
energy which forms a second. Energy manifests itself in many different forms in the particles, and
when we seek to go beyond these particles, on the one hand we have an increasing difficulty at
making distinctions between real beings and virtual beings, and on the other hand we see that
these particles are the manifestation of a subjacent reality which is even more ungraspable.
Finally, the reality of the fundamental particles is no more than the expression of the laws of the
universe which are but the product of the diversification of the manifestations of the four great
forces of the universe, which themselves are reduced to a single force that is sought by the theory
of a great unification. In this way we can better understand Baha’u’llah when, in the “Tablet of
Wisdom”, he says that there is a simple nature at the origin of the physical world and that this
nature is similar to the human spirit. This nature designates the most fundamental level of
sensible reality, that which is situated just after the first degree of substantification and of
coalescence and which is in direct contact with the Imaginal World.

5. The Imaginal World as interworld

Finally, the Imaginal World of Baha’u’llah is an “interworld”, a barzakh to return to the
expression of Ishraqi philosophy. Here the word “world” is not utilized in the normal sense in
PUP:255
SAQ:XVI:83-84

which Baha’u’llah understands it. A “world” is for him an ontological modality. To speak of an

imaginal “world” would suppose that this can have an ontological modality proper and distinct from that of spiritual realities or physical realities. But it is not certain that we can isolate the Imaginal World in one discrete ontological sphere. This is more likely an “interface”, a sieve which separates the spiritual world from the material world. Thus, its status seems to participate in the two worlds, spiritual and material.697

We have already explained that the Imaginal World can be the world of the laws of the cosmos, but we can also say that this world is perhaps the world of “reality in itself”, which is to say, of the reality which is beyond the phenomenon, or something very close to it. By the expression “phenomenal reality” we can define the reality which can be grasped by the physical means and which can be described by means of a mathematical formalism. However, science shows us that the phenomenal reality is not all the reality. Beyond the phenomenal reality there exists a subjacent reality which is more fundamental [and] which we call “the veiled reality”.698 This reality in itself is not measurable. It is situated outside of space and time. It is not describable in mathematical algorithms. Nonetheless, we know that it exists because it influences physical phenomena as is shown by certain experiments. This non-phenomenal reality in itself is however not a spiritual reality. It is situated close to the first point of substantification and it is for this reason that we consider that it is an imaginal reality which thus becomes a kind of noumenal reality.

This reality in itself, is it the first degree of coalescence and of substantification? Probably not, but it must be infinitely close to it. Baha’u’llah speaks of a “first degree” which supposes that the process of coalescence passes through multiple degrees or phases, the last resulting in the first singularity which is perhaps the origin of the universe. Considered from this perspective, the Imaginal World is no more than a simple abstraction, the result of metaphysical speculations. We know how much Baha’u’llah detested metaphysical speculations based alone upon Scholastic

reasonings. [While] science can knock on the door of the Imaginal World, it cannot not step over
the threshold. The Imaginal World is a world part of which is beyond language and that herein
escapes discursive knowledge. It is a world of pure intuition, but what is important, is that this
intuition can in some cases be rationalizable.

6. The place of the active imagination

We see the reappearance here of the difference between the concept of spiritual realities (haqa'iq)
and that of intelligible realities. The Imaginal World is a world of the intelligible, but it is not the
world of spiritual realities. At the same time, certain spiritual realities are intelligible but are not
imaginal. The Imaginal World is also the place of these realities which we have sometimes called
“intellectual”, [and] sometimes in order to better distinguish them from intelligible realities,”
conceptual”. The intellectual or conceptual realities are thus realities which do not have an
existence independent of the physical reality. For example, the number TT does not have an
existence independent of the cosmos, like also the quantum of energy or the law on the square of
This brings to mind another “interface” between the sensible and the spiritual, called the “common
faculty” and depicted in SAQ:LVI:245-246
A la recherche du reel, especially pp. 147-162

the hypotenuse. It is thus an intermediary reality with an indistinct ontological status. These
conceptual realities do not exist independently of empirical reality. Nevertheless, their existence
seems to have preceded that of the universe, we could even say “preexistent” in the sense of a
purely causal and ontological preexistence and not a temporal preexistence. Another aspect of
these conceptual realities resides in the fact that they exist in the human spirit. Certain
philosophers even think that they cannot exist independently of the human spirit, which can be
interpreted in two ways: be it in the framework of a though founded upon the solipsism but
which would be fundamentally opposed to the thought of Baha’u’llah; be it in the framework of

our concept of the anthropic Spirit. Because an anthropic Spirit to know the Creator has always existed, then this spirit ontologically preexisted the universe and contributes in determining its laws of intelligibility. This principle explains why the universe is not intelligible and why a mysterious relation seems to exist, between the laws of the functioning of the human spirit, which constitutes rationality, and the laws of the universe. This mysterious relation is particularly evident in mathematics and in geometry where it is frequently the case that at the start mathematicians construct a theory based on a universe that appears like a pure play of the spirit without relation to any known reality, and from which we learn some decennials later that it forms an indispensable instrument for constructing a physical theory founded itself upon a concrete reality. All these points bring up multiple questions which we only lightly touch upon here and which we do not at all pretend to resolve.

Thus, the Imaginal World seems to have two sides: a side turned towards empirical reality which is open to discursive knowledge and constituted by conceptual realities, and a side turned towards the spiritual world, situated outside of language and only accessible by intuitive thought.

We see that the Imaginal World, such as it seems to be found in the philosophy of Baha'u'llah699, little resembles the Imaginal World of Mir Damad or Mulla Sadra Shirazi. Nevertheless, between the two conceptions, there remains something in common. In both cases the Imaginal World remains a world of imagination. And we must understand the meaning of the word "imagination". By the way, neither Baha'u'llah nor 'Abdu'l-Baha ever uses this expression, although the latter lengthily describes the process. The imagination which is being considered here is not the visionary power which permitted certain illumined Shi'is to enter into communion with the world of the Imams. It is not a visionary imagination, which is why instead of the expression "creative imagination" conceived by Henri Corbin we prefer the expression "active imagination" because this imagination creates nothing—it only discovers. In

fact, this active
imagination is nothing other than reason ('aql), about which ‘Abdu’l-Baha speaks in “Some
Answered Questions” and about which we have already said that it must not be confused with
the rationalizing reason of the Western classical philosophers, for it is a spiritual reason
permitting the synthesis of intuitive knowledge with discursive knowledge. It is this active
imagination, or this spiritual reason, which distinguishes man from the animal, permitting him to
penetrate the mysteries of creation and to elevate himself above nature in discovering its laws.
On the other hand, it is this same rational and imaginative faculty which permits man to
understand the mysteries of divine revelation. Here we rediscover the two sides of the Imaginal
World.

We wish to greatly emphasize the caution with which we advance upon this terrain.

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7. The nature of Nature

All this permits us to understand that the Baha’i writings do not radically oppose the physical
world to the spiritual world, or the sensible world to the intelligible world. This dualism is foreign
to the Baha’i spirit. The two worlds constitute the Pleroma; they are the expression of the divine
attributes and the universe is but the manifestation of the same Will. This is the meaning of all
that Baha’u’llah says about Nature. For example:

“Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its
manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for
men of discernment. Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the
contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-
Wise. Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being,
no one should question this assertion.”700

CONCLUSION

Our study as been essentially oriented towards questions of a metaphysical order, and because of this we have been obliged to apply to the writings of Baha'u'llah the methods of historical and philosophical criticism. This approach poses a real problem because Baha'u'llah does not present himself as a thinker and a philosopher, but as a Prophet and a divine Manifestation. His thought thus has a foundational function, and it can not be reduced only to its philosophical and metaphysical elements. The writings of Baha'u'llah aim less at communicating a message than to producing a shock in the consciousness of the reader which will be the point of departure for a process of spiritual transformation. Thus there is a semantic content which does not exactly correspond to the spiritual (ma'ani) meaning which must be extracted from the text as a precious stone must be extracted from its vein-stone. Furthermore, this spiritual meaning is not a universal meaning. The meaning is individualized in each mystical seeker and depends upon a sort of personal resonance. It is this search for this individualized meaning that constitutes the finality of psychological hermeneutic about which we spoke in the Introduction. The term "psychological" indicates that we are not in the presence of a cognitive science, but of a knowledge of the soul, the acquisition of which depends closely upon a personal spiritual practice the prodedeutique of which we have explained in the Chapter consecrated to the "conditions of the true seeker", and to the three kinds of gnosis. This gnoseology, as we have named it, is a hermeneutic, we would even say a hermeneutic of a phenomenological character. It is its gnostic aspect which results that the thought of Baha'u'llah is not reducible to a simple philosophy and it is for this reason that we have proposed to speak of [his] theosophy. While philosophy seeks a rational and universal knowledge, theosophy seeks a spiritual and individual knowledge. To go further, theosophy does not exclude philosophy. It is rather a transcendence. This theosophy is not conceived without an important philosophical application, which is to say without a mastery of rational thought, a comprehension of the world that implies a dialogue with science, [and] a knowledge of oneself and others.

We have encountered

Lawh-i-Hikmat, TB:142

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all along our study the three fundamental elements that constitute all theosophy: a hermeneutic, a gnosis and a philosophy of nature. But in this totality it is gnosis which, as a theory of spiritual knowledge, establishes the unity of Baha'i theosophy, for, in itself, the union of a sacred hermeneutic and a philosophy of nature would lead more likely to a theology. Let us remember one more time that we understand the word "gnosis" in its technical sense, in the sense of a knowledge which is acquired through the interior transformation of man. This interior transformation is the fruit of a spiritual practice which 'Abdu'l-Baha calls simply "the Baha'i life" and which is composed on the one hand of spiritual exercises and on the other hand a praxis which is incarnated in the idea of "service" (khidmat). This praxis indicates that every Baha'i must become a "servant of humanity".
The spiritual exercises of course put emphasis on prayer, but this prayer must, to have value, be accompanied by the reading of the sacred texts and meditation upon them. Through this meditation the consciousness becomes saturated by the divine Word. It becomes totally imbued therewith, and thus this Word becomes the agent of the transformation of the interior being. The action of the divine Word in the consciousness constitutes the true sacred hermeneutic. We thus conceive that it is gnosis that is found at the origin of the hermeneutical process which characterizes an entire section of the thought of Baha'u'llah.

However, we would not reduce the theosophy of Baha'u'llah to these three elements which constitute its foundation, gnosis, hermeneutic and philosophy of nature. This theosophy embraces many other domains such as psychology, anthropology, epistemology, cosmology and ontology.
This is why, in order to simplify, rather than the word theosophy, which can have an extremely broad meaning, we have spoken of "metaphysics". It is not easy to define what can be the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah, for even though it embraces certain elements of

the classical framework,
it is organized according to a totally different economy, and apart from certain aspects which are
voluntary interruptions [in this pattern], it is totally implicit.

In the thought of Baha'u'llah, the opposition between a physical science of the sensible, and a
metaphysical science of the supra-sensible has no meaning. Furthermore, contrary to classical
metaphysics, the concept of God, or the idea of a first Motive, is totally rejected outside of the sphere
of this metaphysic. God is found in an inscrutable domain, where even the words "Existence" and
"Being" have no meaning, according to the measure that they are related to human experience.

This is a point which seems so important and fundamental to us that we will return to it once more
once we will have better covered the contents of this metaphysic.

If neither God, nor Being is the point of departure for the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah, then only man
is left, and we have seen how the image of the divine is constructed based on man. This construction
would be doomed to an irremediable check if man was confined to the solitary contemplation of this
Absconditum that is impenetrable to the human intelligence. This image of the divine must be related
to something other than God, and it is related to the Perfect Man (insan-i-kamil), to the divine
Manifestation. The fundamental element of this metaphysic is thus the anthropology that includes
on the one hand psychology, the science of the soul, of its nature, of its capacities and of its
becoming, and, on the other hand, gnoseology, upon which we have already discoursed. This
psychology and this gnoseology do not encompass the anthropology of Baha'u'llah in its totality, and
there remains a residual core, for which we have not yet found a designation, but which is organized
around the fundamental question of human nature and of the humanity of man, the finality of
existence and even of his becoming as a species.

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The second shutter of the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah concerns that which we have named "the
transparent theology". We see very well that this transparent theology is

very structured.
Unfortunately, we do not have available a terminology appropriate to define its parts. We have
shown that this transparent theology is based upon a Philosophy of Emanation, but to this
Philosophy of Emanation is added a Philosophy of Manifestation, for emanation and manifestation
in Baha'u'llah are two complementary and inseparable concepts. This transparent theology is not a
science of the supra-sensible because it descends to the level of matter and the phenomenal world,
and must take into account also the Imaginal World, about which we have seen that it resembles the
program (software) of our universe, and the passage of spiritual or intelligible realities to sensible
realities through their point of coalescence. This coalescence supposes a great unity between the
physical phenomena and the spiritual phenomena and justifies that for Baha'u'llah they form but
one world, without any trace of duality, duality being only an illusion created by the situs [stance] of
the human consciousness. This non-duality is at the same time a realism, for in no case does it imply
that the phenomenal world is but an illusion. It is real even though dependent upon a spiritual "sur-
reality" (haqiqat). This is why we qualify this metaphysic as "non-dualistic realist".

This transparent theology serves at the same time as a cosmogony, or rather we should say a
noogony. For Baha'u'llah distinguishes two levels: on the one hand the creation of the spiritual
world, and on the other hand the creation of the material world from the spiritual world. It is the
Spirit that is considered as the "creator" of the spiritual realities, even though this concept
necessitates further development. The Spirit that is a divine emanation (fayd; sudur) acts in
manifesting itself (zuhur) in the mirror of the spiritual realities. The relation between emanation and
manifestation is not clearly explained in the writings of Baha'u'llah. It seems that it was intentional
for these concepts are not, we must not forget, but metaphors the realism of which we must not
exaggerate. The true noogony is found far beyond human comprehension. This transparent
theology is thus susceptible to receiving several interpretations. We could say

for example that it is in
manifesting itself that the Spirit creates the mirror. But we could admit that
the mirror is created
directly by God, or the Holy Spirit, as an independent emanation, or as a
potentiality. The role of
the Spirit would thus be to give it life and to animate it and it is in this
way that it would be the
Creator.

The double process of emanation and manifestation explains how the world must
be considered as a
continuous and unique emanation and not as a series of hypostases which are
linked in a procession.
This double process assures the unity of the Pleroma.

Finally, in the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah, all is related to the Spirit.
The Spirit occupies the place
that the classical metaphysics accorded to Being. It unites the creation to the
Creator. It assures the
unity of the Pleroma, for it is the same Spirit which is reflected in each
mirror. Being the creative
agent, everything it created is spirit, [and] thus all the spiritual realities
and the essence of things are
spirit. We must be careful not to interpret this scheme in an Avicennian sense
in which the
multiplicity of spirits and souls results in the fragmentation of the
instrumental Intelligence. Here the
Holy Spirit manifests the Spirit, or better yet the spirits, for the created
Spirit assures diverse
ontological modalities. It is these ontological modalities that enable us to
speak of "divine worlds" or
of "spiritual worlds". The Spirit manifests itself in a particular form in
each world, and we know that
these worlds are infinite in number. We could represent the Spirit as a
universe in perpetual
expansion. The Holy Spirit is perfect, [so] it cannot evolve in its perfection.
The only way that is

open to evolution is that of infinite diversification.

Thus if we seek to analyze the structure of the transparent Theology of
Baha'u'llah, we would first
say that it is a noology, a science of the spirit, even though the word
"science" here does not has no
meaning and is only employed in a purely metaphorical sense. After the noology
comes the science
of the mirrors which are at the same time the modalities of being—thus we

have on one side an ontology which is an ontology of the Spirit, and on the other side something, which for want of a better term we will call a “philosophy of transparent realities” in order to avoid at all cost speaking of a philosophy of essences, because the word “essence” comes from the Latin esse, “Being”, and has a whole history in Scholasticism and in classical philosophy which brings us back to concepts which can no longer be our own.

Beyond the transparent Theology there must be established a Prophetology, which is not a simple science of prophetic inspiration, but which develops the metaphysical character of the prophetic Spirit considered as an ontological modality in itself.

With these three elements, which are Anthropology, transparent Theology and Prophetology, we have almost made a tour of the whole metaphysic of Baha’u’llah, without being able unfortunately to detail all of the parts. If now we would wish to situate this metaphysic in the totality of his philosophy, other than of hermeneutics which is already a very complex subject, we would at least have to speak of his philosophy of nature, his philosophy of history and his social and political philosophy—a vast program which opens an immense field to research.

What opposes Baha’u’llah most to the spirit of Scholasticism, whether European or Muslim, is his refusal to discourse on God. The position of Baha’u’llah regarding this question is complex because on the one hand the depth of his thought on this point is anti-tradition, and moreover, it is in the language of this tradition that he has confided this anti-tradition. An example [of this] is given by the theology of the divine Names. Baha’u’llah in several important works has negated all possibility of ascribing attributes to God. Nevertheless, we can not open a single one of his books, not even one of his Tablets, be it the most brief, without encountering the invocation of these attributes. He is “the Most Holy, the Most Luminous, the Most Mighty, the Most Great, the Most Exalted, the Most Glorious”701, “the Governor, the Ordainer, the All-Bountiful, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Generous”702, “the One, the Incomparable, the All-Knowing, the

All-Wise”703, “the Almighty, the
All-Subduing, the Unconditioned”704, and so forth. We could thus have the impression of finding
oneself altogether in the framework of Qur'anic theology, and numerous Tablets could be read in
this way without ever giving the impression of derogating to the orthodoxy. However all the
meaning of these Tablets completely changes when one poses the principle that these attributes do
not refer to the divine Essence, but to the Manifestation. Numerous prayers of ‘Abdu’l-Baha begin
with the invocation “He is God” (Huwallah); even this invocation refers not to the intrinsic Essence
but to His Manifestation. In the expression “Huwallah” there exists a duality in which “Huwa” refers
to the Manifestation Who, like a mirror, reflects the image of Allah. In certain prayers, the

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invocation is abbreviated to “Huwa”705 for we can say of the Manifestation that “He is” without
however being able to say what He is nor designate Him by another name.

Probably nobody has collected all the Names and attributes that Baha’u’llah has ascribed to the
divine Manifestation, and indirectly to God, as numerous as they are. And moreover there is one
which is traditional in Falsafa as in numerous other Schools, which is that of “the Being” (wujud),
which we never find in the Baha’i Writings. The God of Baha’u’llah is transcendent to such a degree
that even “Being” can not be attributed to Him, and no word can adequately arrive at Him. His
nature (kaynuna) totally escapes human understanding. It is precisely the experience of Being that
separates the creature from his Creator, because it is in the form of contingency that Being presents
itself to our consciousness, and this Being is a Being-there, a Being in the world. If “Being” is a
presence in the world of Spirit, infinitely modulable in order to [diversify throughout] the infinity of
the divine worlds, then God can not exist in an ontological modality that would place Him in His

creation. It is the mystery of the Ipseity (huwiyyat). Huwiyyat, term which comes from Huwa, “He”, is
the term which permits the description of God without having recourse to the vocabulary of
essences. Huwiyyat is the hidden Identity; that which is beyond Names and attributes, the
impenetrable Hahut.

This particular status, of the divine Essence, results in the Names and attributes [of God] acquiring a
sort of autonomous existence. Very logically, there is total disjunction between the divine Essence
and the attributes. This is why Baha’u’llah created the World of Command for them, which is also
the World of the Manifestation, sometimes identified with Jabarut as the World of the divine Will.
There also, the vocabulary of Baha’u’llah can be very disorienting and can hide its originality under
the appearance of an Orthodox vocabulary. For one must have already profoundly penetrated the
thought of Baha’u’llah in order to recognize behind the word Jabarut, so much in conformity with a
certain tradition, the World of Command ('alam-i-amr) that overturns this tradition.

We can give two divergent interpretations of this World of Command, both of which were perhaps
wished for by Baha’u’llah. The first makes of this an autonomous world, with a quasi-hypostatic
status. It is in this world that is found the origin of all the worlds. The other interpretation makes of
the World of Command an “interworld” (barzakh), and intermediary world between the world of the
divine Essence and the world of particular essences. However, this second interpretation, as
seductive as it may be, presents various difficulties. The first is that if the World of Command is an
intermediary world, we are then required to inquire regarding the status of the Imaginal World, for
this should be included therein. The intermediaries of the Imaginal World would thus become
projections of the divine attributes, which immediately brings up a series of questions.

One of the difficulties which appears is the status of the divine Verb in the world, and, as a
consequence, the imperative theology concerning the different forms of the divine Will when it

manifests Itself in the different spiritual worlds. If the World of Command recapitulates the divine attributes, of which It is the only plain and complete expression, then how can the divine Verb, or the Holy Spirit, sustain their autonomy?

This difficulty determines a third concept, which makes of the World of Command the personification of the Holy Spirit, its total manifestation, we might almost say its incarnation. The

'Abdu'l-Baha, Majmu'ih-yi Munajat, Tihran, 1967, pp. 21,23

metaphysic of Baha'u'llah does not consist in stringing syllogisms, and in piling up speculative arguments in order to arrive at the most economic and most convincing construction possible.

Rather it multiplies partial and complementary points of view, because in any case the spiritual worlds transcend human language and logic. The danger is always that we might fall back into the old Scholastic habits which wish that all should bend to our logic, and to pour the new wine into the old skins of Arabo-Hellenistic tradition. The problem posed here is to affirm the absolute transcendence of the divine Essence and thus to assure the autonomy of the world of Its attributes which making a hypostasis of this world. The solution of this problem is found in the transparent character of each world. In being a mirror, the World of Command is totally independent of the world of the divine Essence, on the ontological plan. In being the divine image and the image of the divine attributes present in the mirror, the World of Command is an interworld, on the phenomenological plan. The World of the Essence is the only world that is a world of pure unicity.

All the other worlds contain an element of duality, but this duality is not ontological but phenomenological.

We should not believe that the metaphor of the image and of the mirror suffices to consume the reality of the creaturely worlds. We must never lose sight [of the fact] that these are simple metaphors. To go beyond this would furthermore constrain us to leave behind the philosophical field, for the closest knowledge of essential realities (haqa'iq) necessitates

a transcendence of discursive
and analytical knowledge. The divine worlds are worlds of intuition that depend upon our personal
experience of the divine. This knowledge necessitates that we attain the station of “haqqu'l-yaqin”, of
the “certitude of the fire” that is accessible to the one who burns in the fire and who experiences the
transformative effect thereof even as the piece of iron acquires in the forge of the blacksmith the
qualities of the fire. However, the iron never becomes the fire. We understand in this way why the
World of Command is not a hypostasis. In this case the mirror can not exist without the image. It is
the image that creates the mirror. On the ontological plan, each world is an emanation (fayd; sudur)
direct from God without there being a process from one world to another, and there is but one
divine light and but one manifestation (zuhur). At the phenomenological plan, the divine light, the
illuminative “ishraq”, is reflected from mirror to mirror. This is the modality of the light that, in
diversifying itself, creates the modality of the mirrors that, notwithstanding the different ontological
modes that are specific to them, remain one. For there is only one light, even as is shown by the fact
that white light possesses in itself the entire variety of the chromatic spectrum, but these colors do
not appear except when this light encounters different materials. As a mirror reflecting the image of
the divine attributes, each world is an effusion of light (tajalli) that permits them to become manifest
through the double process of the mirror, which receives the image (jala) and which sends it out
(istijla). Emanation and Manifestation are two complementary and inseparable processes. It is for this
reason that the World of Command can appear at the same time as an autonomous world and as an
intermediary world.

As the first manifestation of the divine attributes in their station of differentiation, the World of
Command appears to be the prototype of the perfect Manifestation (zuhur) of the divine Names and
attributes, even as the universal Manifestation (mazhar) appears as the prototype of the Perfect Man,
the model of the anthropic Spirit. The World of Command is thus the model of absolute perfection

to which all of the other worlds aspire, and this is why Baha'u'llah sometimes calls the station of the universal Manifestation "the greatest vision" (al-manzar al-akbar).

In professing the autonomy of the divine names, Baha'i theology finds its simplest expression, which

is to say the affirmation of a "Nature" (kaynuna) from which all of creation proceeds, inaccessible in Itself to the spirit of man, but distinguishable by Its effects upon creation.

Considering the insistence with which Baha'u'llah affirms the divine transcendence, we might ask if this unknowable God can still be a personal God, and if we do not ultimately approach a system close to Indian Vedanta. What personal relation can the believer have with this unknowable God?

This is a question that is far from being resolved. The first generations of Baha'i thinkers, who were essentially of Persian extraction and thus familiar with Shi'i culture, completely ignored the problem. It began to be asked with acuity when the Baha'i teaching first penetrated into [the West] at the end of the 19th century, and later in India. In order to arrive at some clarifications upon this subtle question, it is appropriate to consider the very notion of a personal God. Is God a Person? This brings us to ask the question, "What is a person?", a question that can receive a diversity of responses.

Let us first note that this problem is particular to Christianity and to Christian civilization and that it has remained fundamentally foreign to Muslim culture. This explains why Baha'u'llah seems never to have directly addressed this problem. The idea of the Person has two sources: the one in Stoicism with the notion of the "role" that the human being plays, and the other in Latin juridicalism, which endeavored to define the relations of the individual subject with the social community.706 This is the transposition of the Latin notion of "persona" upon Greek Trinitarian theology and the concept of "hypostasis" which created the notion of person inherited by the Middle Ages.707 We will not enter here into the very complex history of this concept, and will content ourselves with saying that the

first definitions which go back to Boece make of the “person” a substance that is opposed to nature—a subsistence708—while Richard de St. Victor eliminated all reference to substance from the definition. Thomas Aquinas returned to the Boecian definition with certain arrangements709. It is not in this theological sense that we can consider the God of Baha’u’llah as a “person”, because God is not a substance and probably not an Essence. Richard de St. Victor introduced a psychological concept of the “person” by making it “an individual existence of a reasonable nature”710. Kant711 and Hegel712 would place rationality at the very center of the concept of “person”. This brings out a new question: Is the God of Baha’u’llah reasonable? This is also a difficult debate to settle. We are inclined to think that the notion of reason is appropriate to man, and that it is precisely this which determines the “inscrutability” of the hidden Identity (huwiyyat) of God. There is however in human reason something like a resemblance with divine reason, a reflection that opens a narrow channel to spiritual understanding.

M. Bergson, “Les structures du concept latin de persona,” in Etudes d'Histoire litteraire et doctrinale au XIIIe siecle, second series, 1932, pp. 121-161
A. de Halleux, “Hypostase et personne dans la formation du dogme trinitaire,” in Revue d'Histoire ecclesiastique, volume 79, 1984, pp. 313-369, 625-670
Boece, Contra Eutychen et Nestorium, under the title of De duabus naturis et una persona, Patrologie latine, volume 64, columns 1337-1354
A. Mallet, Personne et Amour dans la Theologie trinitaire de St. Thomas d'Acquin, volume 1, Paris, 1956
Richard de St. Victor, De Trinitate, volume 4, Chapters 22-23
E. Kant, Fondement de la Metaphysique des Moeurs, Chapter 2
Hegel, Principes de la Philosophie du droit, pp. 34-39

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The more modern definitions of the concept of “person” insist upon self-consciousness, self-will, reason, personality—understood as the sum of psychological characteristics, singularity, the separate consciousness which is distinguished from the world, conscience, etc. The problem resides in this, that our idea of the “person” derives from the human “person”. It is

thus the vehicle of a psychology
that is fundamentally foreign, like all anthropomorphism, to the thought of Baha'u'llah.

Of course, certain psychological elements do exist in the Baha'i concept of God: these are essentially
Will and Love. But there can be two interpretations of these, one that is realist and takes these terms
in their literal sense, and the other which considers these expressions as metaphorical and
corresponding to a reality that transcends human understanding.

It remains that Baha'u'llah never describes God as a being endowed with personality and
psychological characteristics such as, for example, "the Father" in the Gospels. We believe that we
can thus conclude that the God of Baha'u'llah is not a "person".

However, to say that God is not a "person" is not to totally exclude a personal relation between the
Creator and the creature. We can understand the personal relation as a relation between one person
and another, but we can also understand it to be a presence. Here appears a fundamental
characteristic of Baha'i spirituality. God is present in all of His creation, because He reflects Himself
in every atom; how much moreso is He present in man. He is so much present in him that He
sometimes seems to inhabit him, even as Baha'u'llah says so himself: "thy heart is My home".713 It is
difficult to determine the modalities of the personal relationship of the believer with his God,
because the entire relationship is materialized by the divine Manifestation, that is to say, by
Baha'u'llah Himself. Certainly, everything is not reducible to the Manifestation. The purpose of
terrestrial life is to know and love God. But this knowledge and this love obligatorily pass through
the divine Manifestation. If the distinction continues to exist upon the theological plan, in the
spiritual life is seems to disappear completely.

To make this relation explicit could be the object of a great study on Baha'i spirituality, little studied
until now. We cannot elaborate this question here, but it has nevertheless seemed important to us to
bring up the problem in order to show that we are far indeed the point where everything about the
thought of Baha'u'llah has been said. Regarding this there are strongly

contrasting views among the
Baha'is themselves and it is likely that, in the future, different schools of mysticism will be delineated.
As for ourselves, what we see is that the writings of Baha'u'llah give us a double image: that of an
unknowable and infinitely transcendent God that perfectly suits the philosophers, and that of a
loving God present in man that is the God of mystics. This "presence" is susceptible of receiving
various interpretations, including that of a "personal" God as He has been understood by
Christianity or Islam, and that of a "Something Else" that it is perhaps too early to try to define, but
that might bring the message of Baha'u'llah closer to the mysticism of India and that of certain
Buddhist schools. Even as Christianity of the first centuries had difficulties in detaching itself from a
Judaic interpretation, so also the Baha'i Faith is facing the same difficulty in tearing itself away from
a vision inherited from Islam and Christianity. The great religious messages are always the deliverers
of universality. They never develop through a return to sources, but always through an expansion
which, in the Baha'i Faith, is only at its beginning.
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We would like to close this rapid survey of the philosophy of Baha'u'llah by sketching out [a view of]
its reconciliation with Western philosophy. In the Introduction we have seen with regard to the
letters addressed to the sovereigns of the his epoch, that Baha'u'llah anticipated the majority of the
political and social problems of the 20th century. In his philosophical thought we will again find this
same anticipation. Furthermore, we think that this exercise can prove to be fruitful, for it permits us
to study the texts of Baha'u'llah outside of their internal evidence, and this will show us to what
degree these texts are able to speak to different levels; it also permits us to question our own tradition
and perhaps to discover another way of looking at the world.

The comparison that we have made between Greek and Muslim Neoplatonism and the emanationist philosophy of Baha'u'llah enabled us to discover a parallelism between the
development of philosophy in Islamic culture and in Christendom. This

parallelism was maintained
until the 12th century, at which point the divergencies appeared that deepened in the 13th century
and resulted in the social divorce which had become pronounced by the 14th century. This divorce
coincided with the crisis of Scholasticism and the appearance of new philosophical methods.

The achievement of a certain kind of philosophy, today rejected by some, inspired a passionate
debate in the West in search of causes and consequences. As for causes, we have seen that some
invoke the introduction and then the exclusive reign of Aristotelianism, the development of
Ockamism and of nominalism. Other theses resulted from the sclerosis of Scholasticism that was
incapable of reforming its methods in order to become adapted to a new vision of the world, and the
rebirth in the 15th century of humanism, a distant consequence of the fall of Constantinople. We will
not enter into this debate. The reasons for the end of medieval philosophy are no doubt so complex
that it will probably never be possible to inventory and weigh all of them. Aristotelianism can be
considered one of the causes of the sterilization of Scholasticism because of the absolute belief that
truth must emerge from the usage of logic, and its taxinomic vision of the sciences and of reality that
turned away from the observation of reality. On the contrary, we can see in it the emergence of a
new rationality and the establishment of a methodological rigor, in contradistinction to Augustinism,
that opens the way to Descartes and Leibnitz. On the other hand, the humanistic movement of the
Renaissance was often allied to Neoplatonism as is seen in the philosophy of Marcile Ficin and
Nicolas de Cues. To wish to systematically contrast Aristotelianism with Platonism seems to us a
false debate resulting from an understanding of Aristotle and of Plotinus that could only be that
pertaining to the erudite of the 12th to the 14th centuries, not that of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina or Ibn
Rushd. We think that Aristotle and Plotinus represent the opposition of two movements,
diametrically opposed, within the same philosophy, that was born with Parmenides and which
neither the West nor the Islamic world have [altogether] left ever since. To

have uncritically
assimilated into one Aristotelianism, Scotism, Ockamism and nominalism, [not only] marks a
supposed fidelity to Platonism, but especially a distrust of reason. It is finally the place of reason in
philosophy and in hermeneutic that is at the heart of the debate. However, those who like Corbin
hold Scotism and nominalism for the decline of theosophy and who contrast this decline with the
brilliance of the Ishraqi School too easily forget that Ibn Sina held views that were very close to
nominalism. And in condemning Scotism and Ockamism it would close for several centuries the
only way that permitted philosophy to escape the influence of Thomism.

The crisis of Christian Scholasticism was not only caused by internal problems. It came to the fore
because the problems that society found itself confronted with were totally new in nature and could

not be resolved without a change of paradigm. Also we should ask why Islam did not know a similar
crisis prior to the 20th century and if this constituted either a strength or a weakness.

It is one thing to investigate the causes of a crisis, and another to envision its consequences. But the
causes and consequences obviously cannot be disassociated from each other. We will soon say why it
seems to us that the crisis of leaving behind Scholasticism, with the advent of Cartesianism and
rationalism through the Spinozan, Leibnitzian and finally Kantian variations, was fated to
culmination in the crisis of the 20th century, and in that which our contemporaries call the end of
metaphysics. We will see how, finally, the thought of Baha'u'llah seems to us to bring a remedy to
this situation. The problem in our eyes is not to condemn this or that school or tendency, but rather
to ask ourselves why Christian theosophy was not capable of surviving the advent of rationalizing
reason. For example, Scholastic Thomism was far from condemning the usage of reason—on the
contrary. The passage to modern philosophy less marks the advent of reason than a certain usage of
reason which effectively results in the disappearance of theosophy.

Why then such a mortal blow? Without doubt because medieval theosophy was an incomplete theosophy. It is precisely this incompleteness of Christian and Muslim theosophy that separates it from the Baha'i concept of theosophy, and this incompleteness results from the incapacity to articulate the individual to the universal. From this, among others, derives the nominalist debacle, the repudiation of the philosophy of essences, and finally, the proclamation of the end of metaphysics or the death of the subject.

Scholasticism sinned through an excess of synthesism to the detriment of analysis. Its method, be it in religious sciences or in natural sciences consists in collecting facts, superposing them, amalgamating them in such fashion that the theory makes sense of all of the known facts, especially the most extraordinary among them, but never to analyze them individually. The rules come from generalization. This explains why everything becomes the business of theology and hermeneutic.
The Sacred Book is supposed to contain the synthesis and of all the knowledge of the universe.
Analysis does not consist in recognizing the fact for what it is, but only to recognize in it a sign of the divine. The knowledge of the sensible comes from the supra-sensible, and not the inverse. Because of this, the philosophy of nature that we find in master Eckart or in Hugues de St. Victor is not an independent branch of theosophy, but is subjugated to hermeneutic. Gnostic intuition operates without the control of reason, without an underlying theory of epistemology. Hermeneutic itself becomes a purely intuitive science, without methodology, and finally culminates only in the superposition of collated individual points of view, without critical spirit, to attempt to form an image of reality. In the form of theology, hermeneutic has invaded the entire field of philosophy, thus preparing the way to dogmatism.

In the Scholastic concept, reason is the Logos, that is, something totally transcendental, incapable of descending into individual realities. Universal reason only reflects itself imperfectly in the sensible world but it never descends. Reason is the perfect expression of the universal. It is normative. But

individuals are too imperfect to incarnate it. They can only try more or less to approach it.

The humanism of the Renaissance was to turn everything upside down. Reason became immanent in things. The analytical method was restored, particularly through the development of Alexandrian methods. At the same time the relation of the individual to the universal was inverted, without the problem being resolved. The new philosophy distinguished itself from the old theosophy in the sense

that it affirmed that all knowledge can only come from reason and exclusively from reason. Mystical intuition completely exits the field of knowledge. The task of philosophy becomes that of assuring the foundations of knowledge, a task formerly devolved upon theology. The retained model was that of geometry, considered the most intelligent expression of universal Reason. Thus there was the idea of a Mathesis Universalis that was for philosophy what the philosophical stone was for Alchemy.

Theosophy disappeared because of its failure to understand the role that Reason plays in articulating between the field of spiritual knowledge and empirical knowledge. It did not know how to preserve an equilibrium between hermeneutic and a philosophy of nature, and did not understand that gnosis can not limit itself to mystical intuition and must unify all the fields of knowledge through reason. Theosophy thus lost its philosophical character and hence the emancipation of philosophy could only take place in opposition to it.

We could make practically the same analysis of Muslim theosophy, with this difference that it never knew a rationalist crisis and on the contrary that it was always nourished by much more important and ceasingly renewed mystical currents. In Islam, as in Christianity, theology suffocated the empirical sciences, and spiritual hermeneutic invaded the entire field of knowledge.

We must then understand what those who speak today of the disappearance of theosophy are speaking about. We have seen that the theosophical project was never taken to its culmination and

that it never succeeded in constituting a Mathesis Universalis which the West always dreamed of
[attaining]. This is why this project left the theological domain in the 16th century to become that of
philosophy. The crisis that resulted shows why empirical sciences cannot be based upon a mystical
foundation.

This long analysis [may] permit us to better comprehend the specificity of Baha'i theosophy, the
declared aim of which is to transcend the crisis of reason. For Baha'u'llah, theosophy is not what it
was for the Scholastics, the foundation of knowledge upon which the development of the empirical
sciences must be based. On the contrary, he proclaimed the autonomy of science and reason. But
science and reason cannot presume to themselves alone a universality of knowledge.

All human knowledge is based upon empirical givens and thus individual realities. It is clear that in
the thought of Baha'u'llah, the knowledge of the universal depends upon the knowledge of the
particular. Thus we are very close to the nominalist theses, but we must make clear which
nominalism we are speaking about, for this nominalism, like also that of Ibn Sina, is far from leading
to the catastrophic consequences that Henri Corbin and Antoine Faivre denounced. Oriental
nominalism is so subtle that often it has escaped the Western critics who did not even recognize it
because this nominalism is perfectly inserted into a Platonic framework, and thus does not present a
contradiction with a philosophy of sciences. It should be noted that if we can speak of a nominalism
of Baha'u'llah, this is not that of Roscelin nor that of the disciples of Dun Scot, but is closer to the
Eastern tradition. It is from this that it is borrowed, because it offers the only practical way for a
philosophy of Emanation.

Because of this fact, to speak of a Baha'i theosophy takes on a new resonance. This theosophy is not
substituted either to science or to philosophy. On the contrary, science and philosophy, as universal
[modes of] knowledge, constitute the foundation thereof. But in many places Baha'u'llah shows that
neither science, nor philosophy, nor the religious sciences, nor any form of

theological dogmatism,

can suffice to render the world intelligible to man, for the world is a personal experience. Science and philosophy furnish us with previous instruments for this intelligibility, but it is never attained in a purely theoretical manner. Beyond the communal experience that is born of inter-subjectivity, there exists an intelligibility more profound, moving and ungraspable that is unique to each individual and that results from his personal spiritual experience. This spirituality is the indispensable element which is added to empirical and theoretical knowledge to constitute theosophy. But, as this spiritual does not come from the domain of inter-subjectivity, it is thus beyond language, incommunicable, pertaining to each individual. Each station, each degree of the spiritual life, possesses its own vision (manzar). None can see what another has seen, nor comprehend what another has comprehended. The secret can not be taught. The secret cannot be divulged. No one can grasp the secret of each spiritual degree, unless he has attained this degree.

Scientific and philosophical knowledge is born of the particular in order to rise toward the universal while theosophical and gnostic ('irfani) knowledge that completes it descends from the universal to the individual. In the domain of spirituality only the inner (batin) exists, only pure subjectivity, spiritual knowledge and thus a kind of phenomenology in which knowledge transcends the world and consciousness.

In the thought of Baha'u'llah, it is clear that we cannot find a Mathesis Universalis, nor even a logico-mathematical language, that would guarantee the foundation of the sciences. This does not mean that the sciences cannot claim objective knowledge, but only that the domain of this objective knowledge is limited and can not exhaust all of reality. What we call reason is in fact nothing but human rationality. But Baha'u'llah establishes a very close link between the modalities of Being and the modalities of rationality. It is a fundamental principle of his thought, that was greatly developed

by ‘Abdu’l-Baha, but the consequences of which we have not seen enough. Being is a purely abstract reality which is born of the modalities of existence which characterize each existing thing, as we know that the fundamental unity of Reality (basitu'l-haqiqat) resides in the Spirit, which is, at the same time, the Logos-Verb. Each degree of reality, that is to say each ontological modality, possesses a structure of intelligibility that pertains to it alone and that is hierarchical. Each existing thing is limited by this structure of intelligibility that permits it only to know, as a function of his particular rationality, the inferior ontological modalities, but which veils the superior modalities. Human rationality thus is but a mode of Universal Reason that incarnates itself in the Spirit, the Logos-Verb. Thus man cannot comprehend either God, or the intermediary realities between him and the divine Essence. However, there is a difference between comprehension and knowing. If man cannot comprehend God, he can know Him. Comprehension is a purely intellectual act, subjected to a structure of intelligibility, while knowing is a cognitive process that is born of experience and that can escape rationalization. Furthermore, as there is an homological relation between the modalities of rationality and all the structures of intellibility, man can, in a very narrow limit, discourse upon the ineffable, for human rationality is part of universal rationality which is deployed in all of creation, and it thus possesses something in common with It.

This explains why there is a rational core to Baha’i theology. Some have even thought that the entire thought of Baha’u’llah can be restored to this rationalism. This rationalism explains for example the control He establishes over the usage of spiritual hermeneutic (ta'wil) or upon mystical experience. This rational core corresponds to what we have called throughout the length of our study, “the philosophy of Baha’u’llah” without him having, himself, used this term.

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The hierarchy of the structures of intelligibility determines the hierarchy of hermeneutics. Ta'wil, or spiritual hermeneutic, is the hermeneutic of Revelation. The only true ta'wil

is that which the
Prophet accomplishes himself in commenting upon the Scriptures of preceding Revelations, as did
the Bab with the Qur'an. The Commentary is in fact a second Revelation having returned to the
“Preserved Table”. This is the science of Jabarut, the World of Command, the doors of which are
closed to men. The science of Jabarut is only acquired from the mouth of the Prophet. All ta'wil
conceived by man is but an imitation, an act that can become an act of corruption and of
interpolation (tahrif) if it goes beyond the mystical domain and is applied to positive and normative
religion (shari'a). Never can human ta'wil become a teaching. All dogmatic value is refused to it.
Exegesis has played no role in the development of Baha’i thought. Spiritual hermeneutic (ta'wil) is
thus called upon to be moulted into a psychological hermeneutic ('irfan), that is the science of Malakut
to perfection. This psychological hermeneutic mobilizes the entire gnostic knowledge in its diverse
components—true knowledge (ma'rifat), true understanding ('irfan), and wisdom (hikmat).

But gnosis, in order to arrive at Malakut, must depend upon the sensible reality, on the world (Mulk),
and upon man (Nasut). This is the deep meaning of the hadith: “We will show them Our signs in the
world and in themselves.” It is in this articulation that the heart of all theosophy is found. In this
scaling of Jacob's Ladder, science is an indispensable element. It is [science] that has revealed to us
the complexity of the world, its incommensurable extent, its true phenomenological nature beyond
the appearance of matter. This is what makes all the difference between Baha’i theosophy and that
of St. Bonaventura, of Hugues de St. Victor or Jacob Boehme. In this sense, it is closer to the
theosophical project of Schelling and his Naturphilosophie.

The idea that God speaks through His creation is already found in St. Paul. The Fathers of the
Church saw therein the explanation of certain Christian dogmas, to which the pagan philosophers
seemed to have arrived at through intuition. St. Augustine approached this point in De Doctrina
christiana and in De Trinitate. The number three that is that of the Trinity plays a role in creation as

Nature offers multiple examples to us. It is the same for all of the numbers, all of which have spiritual significance. To the first intuitions of St. Paul, St. Augustine mixes in the Pythagorean and Platonic teachings. God is reflected in His creation, and thus each creature can be transformed into a sign or a testimony of his Creator. Every thing then returns to the divine intention. Every thing is signum. There is only God Who is the sign of nothing and is content to be Himself. Here we also find hermetic and thus Eastern influences, that were introduced into Christianity by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, for whom Scot Erigen was an important link in its transmission to the medieval world. This theory of natural symbolism would find its full expansion in the philosophy of Hughes de St. Victor, who would systematize the Augustinian and Dionysian ideas and who would culminate in a true sacralization of Nature become Revelation and the divine Book. Nature itself sings the praise of the Creator as St. Bernard said. It carries in itself a message addressed directly to man. The Romantics and Baudelaire are not far off. We are here in the presence of a semiology of Nature, but we also see why this semiological hermeneutic cannot result either in a philosophy of nature or in a mature theosophy. No science can be established upon the medieval natural symbolism. Reason as discursive thought has no place in it. We swim in a holistic atmosphere in which the individual had plenty of trouble finding his place, in which the individual is confused always with the universal. This does not entail leaving my consciousness as an individual in order to attempt to derive universal verities from my experience, but on the contrary to pose in a dogmatic manner equivalences in affirming a priori the meaning of celestial things in order to project them thereafter into nature as St. Augustine did with the Trinity.

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Baha’i movement is exactly inverted and it is worth emphasizing this, for we might fear that the development of a symbolism of nature of the medieval type marks the return of a certain anachronism of thought. The Baha’i semiological hermeneutic inserts itself altogether in the

framework of the psychological hermeneutic ('irfan), which is to say that it has no dogmatic value and remains personal to the spiritual seeker. Creation is the vehicle of a meaning, not in the absolute sense, but one that resonates with the inner being of the seeker. This meaning progressively elevates itself beginning with empirical science and in order to rise to the heaven of mystical meaning. It consists first in the search for a global meaning to Nature, not of a bilateral correspondence between objects and their symbolic referent. This global meaning is what makes the difference between a symbolism of nature of the medieval type and a Philosophy of Nature. In the framework of a Philosophy of Nature, the relation between things becomes as important as the things themselves.
Science explains the phenomenal reality of things while Philosophy of Nature searches out the teleological meaning of creation. It must tell us why things exist, what is the purpose of evolution.

In medieval symbolism, it is God Who is reflected in Nature and Who uses things as a signum. In Baha'i thought, it is not God Himself, but the spiritual worlds and to begin with the closest among them, Malakut. This completely reorients the nature of the meaning sought. In Baha'i thought this meaning is metaphysical and teleological. It consists in imagining the infinitude of creation with its infinite number of worlds, in considering nothing but the miniscule specimen of but one of these worlds. The nature of man alone, at the same time material and spiritual, makes this wager possible.

The search for a global meaning for creation does not exclude the created objects from individually taking on a symbolic meaning. We have seen multiple examples of this in the first two Chapters of our study when we spoke of the soul and of Malakut. Baha'i thought does not result in a resacralization of nature alone, but in a resacralization of the world, which thus includes the human sphere. Here is a return to a fundamental verity brought to light by psychoanalysis. Well before rational thought, the inner man is a universe of symbols and archetypes. In order for our spiritual life to develop, it is necessary that this symbolic world be living. Our inner world is composed of a

multitude of symbolic functions associated with our spiritual qualities. These symbolic functions have need of permanent solicitation so that our intuition might remain awakened. The prayers of Baha'u'llah are constructed entirely on the basis of this symbolic universe and there is a whole study to be undertaken thereon. For example, one of the symbolic functions that exists in the inner man is Life. We should be able to study the whole value of the notion of Life for the human psyche. Erich Fromm spoke of it very well when he elaborated the concept of "biophile". The symbolic function of Life is one of the most pregnant [symbols] which is why we find it evoked in all spiritualities. But when Baha'u'llah wishes to evoke Life, he does not evoke Life in itself, Life that would be like a Platonic idea, with an independent existence. He speaks of the symbolic function that exists in the soul of man in evoking nature. He does this the most often through the image of the water of the source and of the fountain, or by the image of the tree or plants that grow, flowers or buds. If we were to study the prayers of Baha'u'llah from this angle, we would see delineated there an entire symbolic universe. This symbolic universe establishes a double correspondence: a correspondence between Nature and the inner man on the one hand, and a correspondence between nature and the spiritual world on the other hand. Nature is that which serves as a link between man and Malakut.

The destruction of our symbolic universe was one of the causes of the dehumanization of civilization. The promulgation of a new spirituality passes through a resacralization of Nature and

the World. It is only for a century at most that, thanks to the progress that we have made in the knowledge of the human psyche that we can comprehend the importance of this stake for the spiritual future of humanity. In the thought of Baha'u'llah there is a clear intention to restore metaphysics.

If Baha'u'llah restores metaphysics, it is not, as we have understood, in the sense in which one restores an old tradition that has fallen into disuse. Baha'i metaphysic

opens to study a totally original avenue, unfortunately practically unexplored. Baha'u'llah has broken with the classical metaphysical tradition and he seems to have anticipated some of the greatest philosophical intuitions of our century, that gives to his thought an undeniable character of modernity for the one who knows how to go beyond an Eastern language deprived of most of the technical vocabulary to which we are habituated.

In order to understand why it is necessary to restore metaphysics, it is necessary to comprehend why its end was so quickly proclaimed. It is because manifestly, after having shown proof of a great fecundity throughout several centuries, metaphysics had arrived at an impasse at the end of the 19th century. The reader will understand that the causes and the consequences of this impasse are very complex and that it is not possible to summarize them all here in a few lines without leading to outrageous simplifications and omissions. Nevertheless we should be content with aiming our projectors in some directions, those a comparison of which with Baha'i positions appears to us to be particularly fecund.

We will recall that we have seen in the Chapter consecrated to psychology and to the question of the spirituality of the soul, that the West never arrived at a harmonious synthesis between the philosophy of essences inherited from the Greek world and the psychological givens furnished by the Judeo-Christian [Scriptures], in which there are many contradictions. The destruction of what was fundamentally a Greek philosophy seemed so closely tied to Christian dogma that the fall of the one entailed the fall of the other. The task of reconstructing a metaphysic that would be relatively independent from Christian dogma appeared from the end of the Scholastic period and was essentially the work of Descartes and of Leibnitz, even though their apologetic intention was clear.
In doing so, they reconstructed the edifice with the same stones, contenting themselves with lightly altering the design. It is singular to note to what extent metaphysic, and especially ontology, has little evolved, from Aristotle to Wolf. In the 13th century two great currents were

constituted: the monists
who affirmed that there exists in the world but a single substance qualified
through the means of
diverse attributes and of diverse modes; and the monadists who considered that
there is an infinite
number of substances, each one qualified by an infinite number of properties.
The classicists had the
habit of making the whole rest of their philosophy depend upon metaphysics. The
first dissonances
appeared when Locke and Hume elaborated theories of knowledge, autonomous from
metaphysics,
and even unsettling its foundations.

But the true crisis in metaphysics took place in the 19th century when it
appeared that it was more
and more difficult to give an epistemological basis to the exact sciences. Some
decades later with the
failure of the Hilbertian program, the powerlessness of metaphysics seemed to
have been
consecrated. In effect, in the space of 20 years was to affront a whole series
of crises. First came the
crisis of logicism which critiqued the exact sciences, then the crisis of
psychoanalysis that impacted
the social sciences. We have already attested to the impasse in which Hegelian
metaphysics found
itself and the sterility of neo-Kantism, which sought to succeed it in the
German universities. The

case of Russel is particularly characteristic of this crisis. He first was
under the influence of neo-
Hegelianism and the Platonism of Meinong714, and then the works of Frege, he
carried out a
complete axiomatization of mathematics through the assistance of a formalized
language the rules of
which were so clearly formalized that they rendered useless all recourse to
intuition and that they
excluded all possibility of error by permitting the description of the totality
of the world. The logicist
fifth of Russel would be shaken when he discovered that all propositions could
not be reduced to the
subject-predicate form, which led him to abandon the Platonic concept he was
profaning. He
considered that this discovery was the striking proof of the vain hopes of
metaphysics. The logicist
program would be a little further compromised when Godel demonstrated that all
of logic must by

necessity subsist upon undemonstrable propositions. The work of Wittgenstein also was to show the
difficulties with surmounting the ambiguities of natural language.

The Tractatus Logico-philosophicus of Wittgenstein would undoubtedly have permitted the
reconstruction of a metaphysic. This work had an enormous impact because of the sureness of its
demonstration, but his “mysticism” was totally rejected, notably by Russel in his book Mysticism and
Logic, which objected to four propositions of the Tractatus: [1] that intuition was an efficacious
method for penetrating reality and that it could not be distanced either from the experimental
process or from the logico-mathematic approach715; [2] that reality was essentially one716; [3] that
time was a pure illusion717; [4] that good and evil are only appearances718.

It is interesting to note that these four propositions are found in the metaphysic of Baha’u’llah, who
also shares with the Tractatus a very similar approach to language and to its relation to reality. The
principal points of divergence between the two systems resides in the return of Wittgenstein to a
Kantian inspiration that indicated that mathematical beings do not have an existence in themselves,
but are constructed in the human intuition. It is in the study of this question that we can
comprehend the importance of the Imaginal World as Baha’u’llah depicts it, for this Imaginal
World, while it is not clearly defined and which should above all not be confounded with the
Imaginal World of the Muslim Schools of the past, is one of the rare paths that presents itself in
order to avoid the snares of a radical Platonism like that of Meinong and of Frege. For Baha’u’llah,
this kind of reality is totally foreign to the world of spiritual realities: it supposes the existence of a
separate world that has no ontological status in itself because it is an interface world. This is a very
important path for Baha’i metaphysics to explore.

The works of Wittgenstein are too close to us to be understood. We will content ourselves with
attempting their synthesis with those of his successors. From this is born the logical empiricism and
the multiple derivatives on the one hand and the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of language on the other

hand. The logical empiricism of Carnap, Reichenbach and Hempel would be the more implacable

714Translator’s Note: Alexius Meinong Ritter von Handschuchsheim (17 July 1853 – 27 November 1920)

was an Austrian philosopher, a realist known for his unique ontology. He also made contributions to
philosophy of mind and theory of value.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexius_Meinong]
Tractatus, 6.522
Tractatus, 6.45
Tractatus, 6.4311, 6.45
Tractatus, 6.4. The thought of Baha'u'llah is somewhat more nuanced on this point.

adversary to metaphysics. Basing himself on the theory of types of Russel, Carnap attempted to
demonstrate that metaphysical statements violate the rules of logical syntax. His book “La
construction logique du monde” is a whole program in itself. Even ethics must be deduced from the
scientific approach to things. [For our present purposes,] it would be useless for us to follow this very
complex argument. We have only wished to show that the classical philosophers were not armed to
respond to the questions of this new type of philosophy. It is a whole system of the world that is
collapsing. What is as much a factor in the philosophies derived from logical empiricism and the
philosophies of language, is the notion of truth. The notion of truth depends upon our conception of
reality and the adequacy of language [in relation] to this reality. If the nature of the world is elusive
and if language is a veil that we can tear, we enter into a relativist world. It suffices to superpose this
relativism to individualism in order to understand the crisis of modern thought.

The 20th century did not lack for attempts to surmount this crisis. The two most important
[attempts] were those of Husserl and Heidegger. Husserl returned to the problem of consciousness
and its relations with the world. Because the foundation of knowledge is not found in this world, we
must look in man, which is to say in cogito. Thus, we can surmount the opposition between realism

and idealism. The conscious being is the being conscious of some thing. Consciousness is thus inseparable from the world. It is [consciousness] that constructs the world. All becomes a question of representation. Ontology becomes phenomenology. Husserl returns to the Cartesian program. In order to construct his philosophy he required a certitude that would be its foundation. He found this certitude in cogito, that is, in consciousness and in the self. He envisioned consciousness as an irreducible core. But psychoanalysis questioned the unity of consciousness and the self. To know who is the self who is speaking is not a clear question. Phenomenology surmounted this crisis very well. But it did so by aligning itself to the relativist program of contemporary philosophy.

There is a great number of agreements between phenomenology and the thought of Baha'u'llah. Each of these two programs goes beyond the opposition between realism and idealism. Each of the two affirms that the sensible world cannot be the source of certitude and proclaims the sovereignty of consciousness. Each of them affirms the existence of a transcendental truth, autonomous of the subject. Husserl was one of the first philosophers to have understood that in order to save philosophy of the subject in the framework of a theory of knowledge it was necessary to abandon classical ontology, as did Baha'u'llah. Phenomenology, in opposition to the logicist and empiricist program, affirms the intuition as impossible to outline. "The eidetic intuition" of Husserl, by which a mental eye can have the vision of logical or mathematic universals, is certainly close to [the Baha'i concept of] the Imaginal World. The psychology of Baha'u'llah also shows us that the objectivity of consciousness, that is, of the nafs, does not exist; that the direct grasp of the real without veil and without intermediary also does not exist, even though this is an ideal towards which it is necessary for us to approach, unceasingly, through an effort of purification and detachment from the self. The difference between Phenomenology and Baha'i thought resides in the fact that it always believed in an objective and rational foundation to consciousness, while for Baha'u'llah the fundamental

objective of consciousness, what he calls “the roots of knowledge” is not found in this world, but in a purely intuitive spiritual dimension that is born of the relation of man to the divine.

The Husserlian notion of the “Epoch”, of the suspension of judgment, is very close to what Baha’u’llah calls the abandonment of prejudices and the purification of the self, for in this case as in the other it consists in the same questioning of all knowledge, the employment of consciousness in the contemplation of the past in relation to the world, the search for a maximal distancing between

the self and the world of representations. We must begin with the same return to oneself in attempt to begin to find in man the irreducible core of his self in its privation and its absolute nudity (tajrid).

As in psychoanalysis, [likewise] in Baha’i psychology consciousness is not a monolithic phenomenon. Fundamentally, unity of consciousness does not exist, because on the one hand exists the soul (ruh) and the psyche (nafs) and on the other hand the psyche is made up of two “natures” or two “selves”, the animal nature and the divine nature. Even the notion of ego is not unitary, because the ego supposes different levels of consciousness veiled by what Baha’u’llah calls the “vain imaginations”. The concept of “vain imaginations” explains that all representations of the world suffer from deviation through subjectivity. The problem of spiritual consciousness becomes that of correcting this subjectivist deviation.

Heidegger proceeded from a phenomenological position in order to elaborate a much more radical philosophy. He also proclaims the end of metaphysics, while nevertheless preaching [in favor of] a return to [one of] the fundamental questions of philosophy, the question of Being. Heidegger would in fact revolutionize ontology, for there are only two possible ontologies: that of Plato and Aristotle who consider Being as a first principle, irreducible, and anterior to things in themselves; and that which considers that Being is simply what is found in the existent. In Western philosophy the first

path was imposed in a crushing manner, and we can count upon the fingers of one hand the attempts to offer an alternative thereto. The most important of these was that of Dun Scot, which Heidegger referred to in elaborating his system. Heidegger understood in a certain fashion understood what had been the cause of the impasse of metaphysics, which was that at its foundation it had poorly posed the problem of Being. It is this conviction that pushed him to borrow the only way that seemed to be open.

The ontology of Heidegger presents astonishing similarities with that of Baha'u'llah. But of course the comparison stops there, for they diverge upon all of the consequences derived therefrom.
Heidegger and Baha'u'llah are in agreement in affirming that Being is that which is present in things, and not a principle anterior to things. Thus if proclaiming the death of metaphysic is proclaiming the death of Aristotelian ontology, the one and the Other are in agreement. It is even the death of a whole tradition that nourished both Western and Eastern thought. Furthermore, Heidegger and Baha'u'llah are also in accord on certain aspects that they give to Being. First, the Being of man is incommensurable with the Being of things; further that the Being of man is consciousness and exists only in his presence in the world; and finally tat Being is the meaning, that Being is inseparable from the question of meaning and as Gadamer would say "to be is to know".
Let us remember that Baha'u'llah assimilates "a world" to an ontological modality, and places the world of man (nasut) above the world of nature, the one and the other being characterized by different "spirits". By this fact man exists in a plenitude characterized by a reflexive consciousness.
Furthermore, to the world of man corresponds a particular hermeneutic. Every world possesses its own level of meaning. Finally, the meaning of the world is individualized in every human being.
Consciousness only exists in a process of spiritual development always searching for a superior degree of intelligibility of the world. Of course the language [of the two philosophies] is very different, but these very real similarities are striking. These similarities

can be explained by the
Scotist inspiration of Heidegger. We have seen that one of the points that opposes the thought of
Baha'u'llah to the Arabic Hellenistic philosophy is that this latter identified God with Being. Dun
Scot is one of the rare philosophers who clearly saw the peril in this [view]. For Scot, as for
Baha'u'llah, Being is a reality that is actualized in the existing things and which is inseparable from

them. Being thus can not be in God, whereas for Thomas Aquinas God is an essence in which Being
and Existence are confounded.

However Heidegger would lead philosophy to a much more serious crisis. In reducing Being to that-
being, Heidegger thought he had ruined the possibility of elaborating a metaphysic upon the notion
of Being. But he wished to go further in applying this to the philosophy of knowledge and to
humanism. What he wished was no longer to think of man as a subject, but only as a Dasein. His
ontology is thus an ontology of subjectivity that is opposed to the metaphysic of the subject which
cultivates a culture of Weltloses Ich, of "Me-without-world"719.

Heidegger was thus not content with proclaiming the death of metaphysics, [for he] also proclaimed
the death of the subject. For us it seems to be a logical consequence, and, at the same time, a drama
which is [quintessentially] that of the 20th century. Heidegger is without doubt not responsible for
this. He was nothing other than the mirror of his time.

The intention pursued by Baha'u'llah is to restore metaphysic, which is not to restore an ancient
order, but to restore the subject. But, it is not possible to establish a philosophy of the subject without
a metaphysic. Nonetheless, a philosophy of the subject must tolerate a minimum of nominalism.
The metaphysic of Being does not permit the construction of a philosophy of subject the autonomy
and self-determination of which are assured while conserving a link between the kind of species and
in giving a meaning to history. It is for this reason that Baha'u'llah removed the question of Being
from the center of his metaphysic. We have seen that Being was replaced

[therein] by Spirit as the
first principle. This substitution would not make sense if the economy of the system had not been
profoundly transformed. In the philosophy of Baha'u'llah, the first question is not "How does the
universe exist?, a primordial question posed by the ancient Eleatic physicists, but which today is
relegated to the domain of science. It is rather "Why does the universe exist?" If we reply to this
question: "So that a consciousness might know God" then we immediately see that the question of
metaphysics is transferred from the problem of Being to the problem of consciousness, that is,
ultimately, man. Metaphysics is not constructed in a descending manner from the first principle to
the individual entities, but in an ascending manner, taking man and human nature as its point of
departure.

We believe that we can thus affirm that the message of Baha'u'llah is fundamentally a "humanism".
But this word "humanism" must be taken here in a particular sense, for it refers neither to classical
humanism nor to contemporary critical humanism. It is a humanism that refutes both the anti-
humanism born of Heidegger and the humanism called "post-metaphysical" or "post-modern".

Perhaps the whole meaning of the message of Baha'u'llah can be summarized in his wish to enable
man to discover his real nature. We think that the entire drama of our epoch, is that it has lost the
true notion of man. If we no longer know what man is, then no society is possible, no culture, no
spirituality, no charity and no humanity, no love. All that is left is the law of the market. In order to
come out of this impasse supposes that we re-endow man with a direction and humanity with a
project, not in the political framework, but this would be once more the utopian search for a new
social contract, but in a spiritual framework, that is, by breathing into the body politic new [and]
regenerative values through the power of a therapeutic utterance.
Heidegger, Etre et temps, paragraph 63

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We have already demonstrated how the announced death of the subject is the consequence of the

announced death of metaphysics. By reducing man to Dasein, Heidegger and his followers wish to demonstrate that man has no essence. The destruction of metaphysics thus results in the deconstruction of the subject. Without essence, man is also without definition. He is not a fact of nature. He is not motivated by any cultural determinism. Nor is he led by any teleological principle that would traverse history and lead the species towards an historical or social accomplishment. For Heidegger, the only finality of man is to manifest the truth of Being as presence in the world. Man is thus but a project and this project can not but be individual, after the necessary concessions to a social organization that must remain at a minimum in order not to be contrary to the blossoming of each one.

We see what this philosophy leads to: it is first of all an exasperation of individualism that makes man the source of values in the world, from whence the importance of the problem of liberty. This ends in an absolute social nominalism. Man reduced to his individualism contains not one universality, or [at least] it is minimal. This is what Levy-Strauss sought to demonstrate. It is thus the loss of all transcendence and of the referent of a morality the legitimacy of which is to be found in itself. Social norms do not exist except because individuals accept to adhere to them. But if the individuals, through despair and through their spiritual incapacity to assume this liberty choose marginality, the powerless society is condemned to disintegration. With the loss of values comes the loss of meaning, first the meaning of the collective life, and then the meaning of life itself. The philosophy of history has been the object of attack at least as much as metaphysics. To denounce the absurdity of seeking a meaning in the human adventure has become as much a commonplace as anti-humanism such as was incarnated in Heidegger or Foucault, and the post-metaphysical humanism that we find in Sartre. Finally, in removing the metaphysical base in the search for humanity, the philosophers of deconstruction render all definition of inter-subjectivity impossible, and thus also the construction of an ethic that would the translation of social

and spiritual values and
the meaning of life.

Finally, from the Baha'i point of view, anti-humanism and post-metaphysical humanism are not far
separated from one another. After having seen the radicalism of the metaphysic of Baha'u'llah, we
would not be surprised [to find] that he distances himself also from classical humanism. Baha'i
humanism does not derive from a hypothetic essence of man, that is, from one of the universals that
would be the intemporal man such as he existed in the world of ideas. In this, Baha'i thought
accords with contemporary humanism in saying that man is a project. But for [Baha'i thought] this
project is not totally free. It is obedient to laws that transcend humanity. These transcendental laws
relate in part to the limits that were fixed to the human condition, but above all they relate to the
potentialities which characterize the nature of man.

The notion of "human nature" is fundamentally distinguished from that of "essence", because the
notion of human nature incorporates in itself the idea of evolution. The true liberty of man is to
progress upon the path of the discovery of his humanity, and it is to develop the rich intellectual and
spiritual potentialities with which he has been endowed. That is precisely the meaning of history.

Baha'u'llah affirms that man is a sum of infinite potentialities that will never be completely realized.
It is for each age to discover the humanity that is appropriate to him, as is shown to us by the
concept of "progressive Revelation". Humanity is thus a relative notion, to be rediscovered

unceasingly and which does not take its meaning except in an historical context. Not only has man
evolved and will he continue to evolve biologically, but his psychological structures as [also] his
spiritual being will also continue to evolve. The meaning of spiritual life is thus for each to discover
his humanity in the limited and relative framework of the collective evolution of his epoch, and to
thus assume as his personal duty the progressive discovery of his own inner richness, which

Baha'u'llah affirms to be infinite. Man does not have the choice of ends, but he has the choice of means. The progressive discovery of the humanity of man takes place through the discovery, also progressive but especially relative, of the values that are, as we have seen, the spiritual laws of our world.

This survey of a vast subject has shown us many things. The first is that Baha'u'llah has made a complete rupture with the thought of his time and seems to have had an intuition of a great number of the philosophical ideas of the 20th century. The second is that he goes beyond them to open up perspectives that are totally original. His thought has nothing to do with the Scholasticism of the theological schools of his time. It is presented as the high ranking commentary of Aristotle, Ibn Sina or Mulla Sadra. It is addressed to a situation that is still that in which we live and which is not an abstract problem, but a problem that places in question the future of humanity. From this point of view, Baha'u'llah is capable of dialoguing with all the great philosophers of our epoch. From one side, his thought ratifies a great number of the intellectual perceptions of the 20th century. From another side, it is a very great force of criticism and of proposition. The interest in studying this thought is not then purely historical. There is in this work a power of questioning that leads to the reconsideration of an entire part of our culture, but which is, at the same time, a message of immense spiritual hope.

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ENDNOTES

i
Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) was the great-grandson of Bahá’u’lláh. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá’u’lláh, designated by his father as the perfect exemplar of his teachings and as his only and unique interpreter designated Shoghi Effendi in his Will and Testament as “Guardian of the Faith” (Vali Amru'llah) and bequeathed to him his function as unique interpreter of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh. Shoghi Effendi exercised his functions as Guardian, from the death of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1921 until his own death in 1957. He did not have a successor. Shoghi Effendi has himself bequeathed to us a vast corpus consisting of several tens of thousands of letters in which he replied to questions which were posed by the believers upon the texts of his great-grandfather (Bahá’u’lláh) and his grandfather (‘Abdu’l-Bahá), and several works among which is “God Passes By”, a history of the Bábí and Bahá’í movements from 1844 to 1944.

ii
‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844-1921) was the eldest son of Bahá’u’lláh. Nine years of age at the moment of Bahá’u’lláh's first exile, he was always to follow his father who during his life designated him as “the Greatest Branch” (Ghusn-i-a'zam) issued from his tree and designated him as the head of the household. It is from this epoch which dates the habit of calling him “the Master” (Agha). In his will and testament [Kitab-i-'Ahd], Bahá’u’lláh designates him as “the center of his covenant” (markaz-i-mithaq) with men and the only and unique interpreter of his writings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assumed the direction of the Bahá’í community upon the death of Bahá’u’lláh in 1892. He remained however a prisoner of the Ottoman Empire until 1910. From the time of his liberation, he undertook the propagation of the message of his father by voyages to Egypt, then to Europe and North America

until the beginning of the first World War the onslaught of which he had predicted. He made two long visits to Paris in 1911 and 1913. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has bequeathed to us numerous writings including numerous “Tablets”. cf. M.-M. Balyuzi, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh,” London 1971 and S. Le Maitre, “Une grande figure de l'unite ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” Paris, 1952.

iii

Translator’s Note:

“Say: Glory be to Thee Who hast caused all the holy Ones to confess their helplessness before the manifold revelations of Thy might, and every Prophet to acknowledge His nothingness at the effulgence of Thine abiding glory.” (GWB, XXIII, p. 59)

Wert thou to ponder in thine heart, from now until the end that hath no end, and with all the concentrated intelligence and understanding which the greatest minds have attained in the past or will attain in the future, this divinely ordained and subtle Reality, this sign of the revelation of the All-Abiding, All-Glorious God, thou wilt fail to comprehend its mystery or to appraise its virtue. Having recognized thy powerlessness to attain to an adequate understanding of that Reality which abideth within thee, thou wilt readily admit the futility of such efforts as may be attempted by thee, or by any of the created things, to fathom the mystery of the Living God, the Day Star of unfading glory, the Ancient of everlasting days. (GWB, LXXXIII, p. 165)

From eternity Thou hast, in Thy transcendent oneness, been immeasurably exalted above Thy servants' conception of Thy unity, and wilt to eternity remain, in Thine unapproachable

singleness, far above the praise of Thy creatures. No words that any one beside Thee may utter can ever beseem Thee, and no man's description except Thine own description can befit Thy nature. All who adore Thy unity have been sore perplexed to fathom the mystery of Thy oneness, and all have confessed their powerlessness to attain unto the

comprehension of Thine
essence and to scale the pinnacle of Thy knowledge. The mighty have all acknowledged their
weakness, and the learned recognized their ignorance. (PM, No. 79, pp. 129-130)

The Bab expressed the same concept in many of his writings, including these excerpts:

He is exalted above the comprehension of all things, and is inscrutable to the mind of every
created being; none shall be able to fathom the oneness of His Being or to unravel the nature
of His Existence. No peer or likeness, no similitude or equal can ever be joined with Him.
(Selections from the Writings of the Bab, p. 154)

The signs which the sanctified essences reveal and the words which the exalted realities
express and the allusions manifested by the ethereal entities all proclaim that Thou art
immeasurably exalted above the reach of the embodiments of the realm of being, and all
solemnly affirm that Thou art immensely high above the description of such as are wrapt in
the veils of fancy. (Selections from the Writings of the Bab, p. 206)

Men of wisdom, who had but a notion of the revelation of Thy glory, conceived a likeness of
Thee according to their own understanding, and men of erudition, who had gained but a
glimpse of the manifold evidences of Thy loving-kindness and glory, have contrived peers for
Thee in conformity with their own imaginations.

Glorified, immeasurably glorified art Thou, O Lord!

Every man of insight is far astray in his attempt to recognize Thee, and every man of
consummate learning is sore perplexed in his search after Thee. Every evidence falleth short
of Thine unknowable Essence and every light retreateth and sinketh below the horizon when
confronted with but a glimmer of the dazzling splendour of Thy might. (Selections from the
Writings of the Bab, p. 207)

The Jewish mystics referred to the unknowable essence as “Ein Sof” (Hebrew: without end), and
quote the famous words of YHWH to Moses:

33:18 And he [Moses] said, I beseech thee [YHWH], shew me thy glory. 33:19 And

he said, I
will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before
thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew
mercy. 33:20 And he [YHWH] said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me,
and live. 33:21 And the LORD said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a
rock: 33:22 And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of
the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: 33:23 And I will take away mine
hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen. (King James Bible,
Exodus)

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There are also the words of Jesus in the Gospels that point to the inability of human beings to
know the essence of God:

Jesus saith to him: I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but
by me. (Gospel of John, 14:6)

…neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will
reveal him. (Gospel of Matthew, 11:27)

…and no man knoweth…who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will
reveal him. (Luke 10:22)

But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.
(Gospel of Matthew, 24:36)

But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven,
neither the Son, but the Father. (Gospel of Mark, 13:32)
iv
“Mother-Book” (“Umm al-Kitab”) is generally interpreted by Muslims as designating the celestial
prototype of the Qur'an. Certain traditions (hadith) also speak of the “Original-Book” (Asl al-Kitab).
It is of course a Qur'anic expression very close to that of “preserved Tablet”, and the commentators
have long argued in order to know whether these two expressions are synonymous.

They have
generally concluded with subtle distinctions that we cannot reproduce here. We read in the Sura of
the thunder [suratu'r-ra'd](Qur'an XIII:39): [yamhuwa allahu mayashaa'u wa yushbitu wa 'indaha
ummu'l-kitabi] “God effaces that which He wishes and establishes that which He wishes for He
witholds the Mother-Book”. The “Mother-Book” appears thus here as linked to the divine decrees.
But, paradoxically, this passage, far from speaking of the immutability of the divine decrees, as we
could understand from it, insists on the contrary upon their possible alteration. A second passage in
the Sura of the family of 'Imraan [suratu'l-'imraan](Qur'an III:7): [huwa'l-lladhii anzala 'alaika'l-
kitaba minhu ayatun muhkamatun hunna umma'l-kitaabi] “He is caused to descend upon you the
Book in which are found the well established verses of the Mother-Book” [wa-ukharu
mutashabihatun faamma'-lladhiina rii quluwbihim zayghun fayattabi'uwna maatashaabaha minhu
bitighaa'a'l-fitnati wa-bitighaa'a taawiylihi wa maaya'lamu taawiylaha illaa allahu wa'lr-rasikhuwna
fii'l'ilmi yaquwluwna amannaabihi kullun min 'indi rabbinaa wa-maa yadhdhakkaru illaa uwluw'l-
laalbaabi] “and others who are doubtful (mutashabihat, that is to say ambivalent). Those who in
their heart have a penchant towards error follow only their own will and interpret them. But nobody
knows their interpretation except for God, and those who distinguish themselves by knowledge who
say: 'we believe in the Book and that all that it contains comes from God'. Thence think those who
are gifted with intelligence.” This verse establishes then a distinction between the verses which are
“well established” which proceed directly from the Mother-Book, and the verses which are subject
to interpretation and inspire doubt in men. The Bab writes in his Commentary on the Sura of
Joseph [Qayyumu'l-Asmaa']: “In truth, we have revealed to you this Book with truth to our servant
('abd: that is to say to the Bab), and we have given all the clear verses (muhkamat) and without an
ambiguous verse (mutashabihat). And none knows their interpretation except for God and those
whom we have chosen among the sincere servants of God. Consequently ask from the Dhikr (the

remembrance, the mention, i.e. the Bab) their interpretation." This verse would suggest that the

Mother-Book contains the spiritual laws and that the ambiguous verses are the prophecies and the metaphorical teachings the interpretation of which changes in every Dispensation. Only in the Revelation of the Bab is there no ambiguous verse on the condition that one ask for the interpretation from the Bab. Bahá'u'lláh utilizes on many occasions the expression Mother-Book. For example he speaks of God as "He with Whom is the Mother Book" (English: GWB, XIV, p. 34; French: EEB, XIV, p. 32). In a Bahá'í context one could say that the Mother-Book represents the immutable aspects of Revelation such as the spiritual laws of creation, while the social laws and the prophetic or metaphorical teachings are subject to change and to reinterpretation.

v

"Preserved Tablet" (al-lawh al-mahfuzh). Even though the word "lawh", usually translated by "Tablet", can be found in an Arabic root, the word was almost certainly borrowed from Hebrew or Aramaic in the specific sense which it is given by the Qur'an (cf. "The foreign vocabulary of the Qoran," Baroda, 1938, pp. 253-254). The term "lawh" appears in several places of the Qur'an with different meanings. It served to describe the Ark of Noah (Qur'an LIV:13), without doubt because it was made of planks. It seems also that in the Arabic of Mecca or the Hijaz the term meant plank, and it is also possible that the plural (alwah) served to designate the two small planks of wood which served to fasten the pages of a book, from whence the association which certain commentators made from the first centuries onwards between this word and the Qur'an. In the Sura of al-A'raf the term designates the Tables of Laws [alwah] (Qur'an VII:145,150,154) which Moses brought back from Mount Sinai. The expression "preserved Tablet" only appears but once in the Qur'an in the Sura of the signs of the zodiac [suratu'l-buruuj] which ends with these words: [bal huwa qur'aanun majiidun fii lawhin mahfuuzhin] "In truth this is the glorious Qur'an in the form of a preserved Tablet." One

could have understood in a very prosaic manner that the Qur'an is preserved between two planks of wood. But the commentators have made it noted that the word “lawh” is here in the singular and that it is even the only time in all the Qur'an in which it appears in the singular, which could not be the fruit of hazard. It is probable that they are right and that the word “lawh” in the singular is charged with a technical meaning which must be sought in the Hebrew or Aramaean language.

Certain commentators, to be truthful rather rare, have proposed to link the adjective “preserved” to the word Qur'an and suggest to read the verse: “this is the glorious Qur'an which is preserved in a Tablet”; it suffices for this to change the vocalization of the vowels as follows: bal huwa qur'Anun mmajiydun fiy lawhun mmahfuzhun. But one must recognize that this reading forces the customs of syntax a little and seems unnatural. Thus the Qur'an gives but few clarifications upon the meaning of this “preserved Tablet” which was going to make much ink run. The term certainly has a Biblical origin for if the root LWH is attested in all the Semetic languages (Amharic, Yemenite, Hebrew, Aramaic), including Arabic, we do not know in this language this particular meaning which links the Tablet to writing while this meaning is attested in Hebrew which perhaps was here subject to a Babylonian influence which research in Sumerian and Akkadian literature could confirm. The origin of this “Tablet” perhaps may be found in the tablettes of clay which the inhabitants of Mesopotamia used to write; from which the association of the tablet and the “qalam” [pen] , which is found even in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh (the supreme pen, al-qalam al-a'la; the qalam in Arabic is nothing other than the calamus in Latin), as we say today “a pen and ink”. The word is attested in Hebrew in the apocryphal texts. In the “Book of Jubilees” (II:10), it is said that the laws concerning the rites of purification of the bedridden are written upon a tablet in the heaven. We find the same affirmation concerning the law of the Tabernacles (Leviticus XXII; Jubilees XXII:5) and the law of the tenth (Leviticus XXVII), from whence Judaism developed the idea that all the laws are transcribed from a “Tablet” which is found close to God. In the

pseudepigraphical literature, the

celestial Tablets are considered as the original text of the revelation. It is because of the knowledge of these Tablets that the Prophet Hanoch (Enoch) had precognition of the future. We see thus appear a second idea which is that the Tablets contain all the divine decrees, and thus fix the destinies of men. These ideas passed into Islam which gave them a considerable amplification. Thus the "Qalam" was to become the symbol of the complete power of the divine. The commentators on the Qur'an substituted a fertile imagination in absence of all objective information concerning the "preserved Tablet". They made of it an instrument of a providential order, the proof of the determinism of the universe, the sign of the election of the faithful and of the damnation of the infidels, the mirror of the divine knowledge, the first intelligence (al-'aql al-awwaliyya), the universal soul of the universe, the first motive, the philosophical stone, the symbol of divine omniscience, the instrument of the substantification of the sensible universe, the first cause of the existence of individual beings created by the divine decree, and still other things as well. Ghazali affirmed that the preserved Tablet contains the collection of the intelligible realities of Malakut (Ihya III:18; IV:428-429). Certain mystics assimilated the preserved Tablet to the heart of man. The controversies over the nature of the "preserved Tablet" had a great theological importance in determining if the Qur'an had been created or if it had always existed in the science of God. This question was tied to that of the liberty of man and of predestination in general.

Translator's Note: There is a reference to the meaning of "the preserved Tablet" (lawh-i-mahfuzh) as found in Bahá'u'lláh's "Kalimat-I-Makunih Farsi," #64, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "Thou hast asked about the "Tablet of Chrysolite" and the "Preserved Tablet". By the "Chrysolite Tablet" is meant the Book of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant which is the Preserved Tablet. It was hidden and preserved, now it is made manifest and resplendent. The Chrysolite Tablet is

recorded and
enshrined in the inmost recesses of the Book of the Covenant.”
('Abdu'l-Bahá, from a Tablet—
translated from the Persian by the Research Department and included in an unpublished
compilation, found at http://bahai-library.com/compilation_hidden_words_bwc . Shoghi
Effendi wrote: “The “Preserved Tablet” is a spiritual expression and has no actual existence. It
sometimes refers to the Manifestation Himself, Whose knowledge encompasses the knowledge of
the former and the latter generations.” (In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi on the margin of an
incoming letter dated 8 July 1929, instructing his secretary—translated from the Persian by the
Research Department, and available at:
http://bahai-library.com/compilation_hidden_words_bwc
vi
Translator’s Note: “Tablets of Chrysolite”, an expression found in GWB, CIV, p. 210/136
(Persian original: alwah zabarjad); in TB, p. 147/126/77 (Persian and Arabic texts: alwahihi'l-
zabarjadiihi, from www.bahai.com); in Persian Hidden Words, #63 (Persian text: alwahi zabarjadii,
from www.bahai.com). “Thou hast asked about the “Tablet of Chrysolite” and the “Preserved
Tablet”. By the “Chrysolite Tablet” is meant the Book of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant which is the
Preserved Tablet. It was hidden and preserved, now it is made manifest and resplendent. The
Chrysolite Tablet is recorded and enshrined in the inmost recesses of the Book of the Covenant.”
('Abdu'l-Bahá, from a Tablet—translated from the Persian by the Research Department, and
included in an unpublished compilation, found at
http://bahai-library.com/compilation_hidden
_words_bwc . Chrysolite derives from Greek, where it means “gold stone”. According to
www.gemtraders.com/research/peridot.html, prior to the advent of modern chemistry, gem
stones were classified only by color. All green gems were called emeralds [zumurrudii in Persian
and Arabic, as found in Persian Hidden Word #77] at one time, and these included chrysolite
gems. In fact, the so-called emeralds so beloved of the Egyptian pharaohs and of Queen

Cleopatra were actually chrysolite gems. Chrysolite, now called peridot, a gem variety of the mineral olivine, was mined on what is now called St. John's Island or Zebirget, in the Red Sea, from 1300 B.C. In ancient times the island was called Topazios, and the chrysolite gems were known as topaz. In Persian, “zabarjad” means “emerald; a chrysolite” and “zabarjadi hindii” is a “topaz” while “zabarjadii” indicates “the colour of the emerald or topaz” (Steingass, p. 610).
According to www.geocities.com/andreacrisco/page004.html, St. John's Island is also called Zabargad, and “The olivine gems found in Zabargad were improperly called emeralds because of their absolutely peculiar green-leaf color.” The fact that Zabargad, the Persian word for chrysolite, is the name of this island, indicates a probable connection with Iran. We know there was an earlier connection with the Pharaohs. There also may be a link to the Hermetic tradition, inasmuch as the keystone of that tradition is the Emerald Tablet(s), regarded as containing the most important teachings of Hermes Trismegistus. Bahá’u’lláh refers to Hermes in “Lawh-i-Basitu'l-Haqiqa” as “The first person who devoted himself to philosophy…After him Balinus [Appollonius of Tyana] derived his knowledge and sciences from the Hermetic Tablets and most of the philosophers who followed him made their philosophical and scientific discoveries from his words and statements.” (TB, p. 148, n. 1)

vii

We think particularly of the example of Thomas Breakwell, one of the disciples of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá who became a Bahá’í in Paris in 1902, died at the age of twenty-nine years, some months only after having embraced the Faith and encountered ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. See: “La vie de Thomas Breakwell,” Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain, Paris, 1992. In a Tablet which he revealed on the occasion of Thomas Breakwell's decease, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that he left the world of Nasut to rise to the world of Malakut, then having received the confirmation of the grace of the world of Lahut, he arrived at the threshold of the Lord of Jabarut. (Muntakhabaati az Makaatib-i-Had.rat-i

‘Abdu’l-Bahá“, volume I,
extract #158). The French translation of the Arabic text says simply: “Tu as quitté ce monde
térrèstre (Nasut) pour atteindre le Royaume (Malakut), tu es parvenu à la grace du monde invisible
(Lahut) et tu t'es offert au seuil de son Seigneur (Rabb).” [This translation follows the English: “Thou
has quit this earthly world and risen upward to the Kingdom, and hast reached unto the grace of the
invisible realm, and offered thyself at the threshold of its Lord.” (SWAB, #158, pp. 187-188)] This
translation seems to be faulty in more than one aspect. “Bi-fayd” should be translated by “by the
grace” and not “unto the grace”. “Wafada” signifying “to attain, to voyage, to visit,” probably was
confused with “fada” signifying “to sacrifice oneself,” since it is translated by “offered thyself”. As for
the word “Jabarut,” it was simply omitted in the translation. (SEAB, p. 186) One must recognize
that this terminology of the divine worlds is ultimately impossible to translate. Once we have
restored the original terms and we have arrived at the comprehension, even slight, of the meaning of
each of these worlds, the Tablet is illumined in an entirely different sense than any translation could
convey. Shoghi Effendi conveyed this conception with regard to the writings of Bahá’u’lláh in a
prefatory note to his translation of the “Book of Certitude”: “We understand that Thomas Breakwell
arrived at the highest station which it is permitted for man to attain: the threshold of Jabarut, there
where one can contemplate the divine Manifestation, not in his Malakutian aspect, but in all the
splendour of his rank as Lord of Jabarut. It should be noted that the Arabic text does not indicate
that Thomas Breakwell actually entered the realm of Jabarut, but rather that he attained (wafadat)
the threshold ('atabaT) of the Lord of Jabarut (rabbu'l-jabarut).”
viii
Translator’s Note: Sources for this metaphysical scheme can be found in the writings of the
Bab: Kitáb-i-Asmá', XVI:17; “Selections from the Writings of the Báb,” p. 131; “Selections from

the Writings of the Báb,” p. 178. In the writings of Bahá’u’lláh: “Prayers and Meditations” (PM),

XXXVIII, pp. 48-49; PM, LXXX, pp. 132-133. In the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Some Answered Questions, “ Chapter LXII, p. 230; “Some Answered Questions,” Chapter LXXXII, pp. 295-96; Makatib-i-’Abdu’l-Bahá, volume II, p. 141; Sharh Wahdat-i-Wujúd, in Makatib-i-’Abdu’l-Bahá, volume III, pp. 354-358; and in Min Makatib-i-’Abdu’l-Bahá, pp. 274-277 with provisional translation by Keven Brown published in “Journal of Bahá’í Studies,” II:3, p. 24; Ma'idiy-i-Asmani, volume II, p. 102; translated in Bahai Scriptures, #914, p. 479. In letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi: Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 29 November 1929, published in #1724, p. 510, “Lights of Guidance,” compiled and edited by Helen Hornby; New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, second revised edition; letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 28 February 1938, published in #909, p. 269, “Lights of Guidance,” compiled and edited by Helen Hornby; New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, second revised edition.

ix

The word “MalkUt” in Hebrew comes from the verb “malaka” which signifies “to reign” and is found employed in numerous uses in the Bible. Wilhelm Gesenius has identified three principle meanings: the meaning of “Royalty” (keonigtum; keonigswurde) as in 1 Samuel 20:31; 1 Kings 2:12; Psalm 45:11 [?], 47:7 [?]; 1 Chronicles 12:23, with, for example, “the royalty of Saul”. The word is later employed in the sense of “Kingdom” (koenigreich), as when one speaks of the “Kingdom of Judah” (2 Chronicles 11:17) or of the “Kingdom of the Chaldeans” (Esther 1:11,19 [?]; 2:17 [?]). (cf. Wilhelm Gesenius, “Hebraische und Arameische Handwortebuch,” 2nd edition, Berlin, 1962.)

Other authors have distinguished a fourth meaning in which MalkUt designates the reign considered in its duration (1 Chronicles 26:31) (cf. Philippe Raymon, “Dictionnaire d'Hebreux et d'Armeneen biblique,” p. 214). As we see, in the Old Testament [Bible] the word MalkUt does not have a metaphorical sense and applies only to political royalty. [How about the references to God as the King?] It is apparently the Essenes who gave to the word a more mystical and metaphorical

meaning. But the elaboration of the Judaic concept of Royalty was particularly labored. The
Hebrews belonged to the nomadic Semites of the desert to whom these notions are foreign. The
installation of a monarchy which replaces the ideal of government of the Patriarchs was above all
the work of David. The notion of “royalty,” to which is attached the concept of “Kingdom” and of
MalkUt, is thus foreign to Judaic culture and must be considered as a borrowing. But, the Jewish
people knew in the course of its history two great royalties, that of Egypt and that of Mesopotamia.
It is probable that the linguistic schemes of the concept of royalty were borrowed from the Assyrian
culture. One notes in any case a very close kinship between the Hebrew MalkUt and the Assyrian
MalkUtu; a word which was perhaps also vocalized as MalikUtu. According to Friedrich Delitzch,
the Assyrian MalkUtu had the meaning of “principality” (Furstenthum), in the sense of the
appanage of a prince or of a sovereign, of a reign, of royalty (Herrschaft). Delitzch cites as an
example the expression “mal-kut la sha-na an”, “a reign without parallel” (from the Assyrian
Koenigsherrschaft IR 35, Nr. 1, 1; Nr. 3, 3) He cites other examples of texts such as: “eli sharrAni
malkut UtU sharru-tU kish-shu-ta lIpu-ush” and III. R. 66. Rev. 24c: “ana ma-lik-tu-tim lul-ta-ta
napkher that”. The interest of the Assyrian texts is that they link royalty to the God Marduk,
opening thereby the way to the spiritualization of the concept. One finds in the Book of Creation
IV. 2: “Marduk a-na ma-li-ku-tum ir-ma”; expression in which Marduk clearly depicted as a “ma-
lik” (king) who has sovereign authority (Eintscheidung) that is to say, the counsellor (Berather), he
who determines (Entscheider) and not the prince (BAl et Ea. K. 2107 Obv. 8). One finds in Assyrian
numerous derivatives of the same family such as “malAku,” “imlik” and “imallik” with the meaning
of expert, of counsellor (berathschalgen, beraten) and in consequence, the term designates the means

by which sovereignty is exercised (cf. Friedrich Delitzch, “Assyrisches Handworterbuch,” Leipzig,
1896). It is probable that this Assyrian influence was determinating in the

evolution of the concept of
Royalty in Israel and for its late spiritualization among the Essenes. The
MalakUt of Al-Makki
Suhrawardi and finally of Bahá'u'lláh could not perhaps have had its day
without this fundamental
Assyrian contribution.

x

The root GBR or JBR is found attested in numerous Semitic languages including
Hebrew,
Assyrian, Syriac and Arabic. It denotes in Hebrew and in Aramaic the idea of
force and of power.
The verb "gebar" signifies "to be strong," "to dominate". It is
first of all the virile power for the
word "geber" also signifies "man" as the Syriac "gebr". The term
serves in Genesis to qualifying the
waters of the deluge (Genesis 7:18 [?]) and in the Exodus the enemies of Israel
(Exodus 17:11 [?]).
Afterwards the concept is spiritualized and becomes an attribute of God, as in
the name of Gabriel.
(cf. Wilhelm Gesenius, "Hebraische und Arameische Handworterbuch," p. 128).
The Assyrian does
not contribute illumination here for in this language the root GBR evolved
differently and serves to
mark opposition. The word "GabrU" (GAB. RI) has a first meaning of
"response" and of
"example" in matters of written documents, and a second meaning in which it
serves to qualify a
person or a thing which is confronted to another. (cf. Friedrich Delitzch,
"Assyrische
Handworterbuch," [p. 128]).

xi

The "Targumim" [plural form of Targum] are the adaptations of the Torah in
Aramaic which
was the spoken language in Palestine about the time of the Christian era. The
texts of the
Targumim were not literal translations of the Old Testatment [Biblical] texts
but rather a free
adaptation into which were admixed commentaries, scolies [?], amplifications
and developments
most often taken from the oral tradition. The word Targum comes from an old
Hittite word
signifying translation which was borrowed by the Egyptians. It is through this
intermediary that the
word penetrated into the Semitic languages, giving targum in Hebrew and tarjUma
in Arabic. The
Arabic takes from it the root TRJM which serves to compose numerous words such
as "mutarjim"

(interpreter; translator) which gave to French “truchement” [interpreter] as well as “drogman” [interpreter, dragoman] having the same meaning in passing into Italian as “drogomanno” which was itself borrowed from Byzantine Greek. The history of words underlines sometimes certain aspects of the unity of the Mediterranean cultures.

xii

The name Aphraate remained alive in tradition because of a series of twenty-three treatises or “Expositions” which, until the discovery of Syriac manuscripts of his work in 1855, were known only through partial translations in the Armenian and Ethiopic languages. We know very little about the life of Aphraate, and even his true name is subject to controversy. The reader could refer profitably to the article “Aphraate” of J. Parisot in “Dictionnaire de Theologie catholique” (Paris, 1923, tome I, 2e partie, col. 1457-1463). This somewhat antiquated work can be updated by consulting the thesis of J.-M. Pierre, “Les Exposes de Aphraate le sage persan,” unfortunately unpublished (Bibliotecque de l'Institut Catholique, 3 vol. in-4*, cote 09099 th 504), which contains a French translation of the “Expositions” of Aphraate with abundant notes. The few elements which are known about the life of Aphraate were reconstituted based on the interpretation of certain passages of his “Expositions”. We know with certitude that these were composed in the Occidental provinces of the Persian Empire in the reign of Shapur between 336 and 345 of the Common Era [A.D.].

Aphraate was born into a “pagan” family, for it is thus that he describes his forefathers, without it being possible to indicate whether they adhered to the Zoroastrian religion or to a Mesopotamian

cult. It was during his maturity that Aphraate converted to Christianity and subsequently decided to consecrate his life to God. We do not know whether he received ecclesiastical orders or if contented himself to follow an ascetic life. It is generally thought that he was vested with the episcopal dignity.

Tradition makes of him the superior of the monastery of Bar Mattai, located north of Mosul, which was the seat of the bishops of the province of Ninevah-Mosul. Aphraate is

designated by the name
Mar James in the colophon of a manuscript, and it is generally inferred
therefrom that James was
the name which he assumed be it from his baptism, or more probably when he was
elevated to the
episcopate. The name Aphraate, a deformation of the Persian name Farhad, does
not appear except
late in the 10th century in the “Lexicon of Bar Bahlul” and in other
sources of the same epoch.
Nevertheless, the “Lexicon” may be the echo of a much older tradition, even
if most of the later
sources do not know the author of the “Expositions” except by the name of
“Persian sage”.
Meanwhile, we know another with the name of Aphraate (Farhad), a martyr who was
a
contemporary of our author, and three bishops from later centuries who likewise
bore this name, a
clear indication that the name was employed by Christians. The Armenian
translation of the
“Expositions” gives its author the name of James of Nineveh, which seems to
be justified by the very
particular affection which he shows in his “Expositions” to the Ninevites
and which would be well
understood if he was their bishop; conversely, George of the Arabs, without
doubt erroneously,
attributes to him the name James of Nisibe. The “Expositions” show that
Aphraate had a very
advanced knowledge of the Bible and that he was animated by a profound and
authentic spirituality
founded above all upon the study of the Gospels, of which he had a prodigious
knowledge as well as
erudition, clarity of expression and humility. His doctrinal positions are
considered by the Church to
have been orthodox for his time, considering that the Church has since
abandoned a number of the
teachings of the Fathers of this epoch, these positions having been censored by
later councils. Eleven
of the twenty-three expositions are texts defending Christianity or and
proselytizing polemic, of
which nine are intended for the Jews and two are directed against heretics.
Aphraate must have
studied Judaic theology closely, this religious environment being represented
in his province by the
old theological schools founded in the first centuries, a characteristic which
is not without interest for
our study. Malkuto is the term he readily makes use of to designate the
“kingdom” of the Gospel. It is

interesting to find that it was this Persian and Christian subject that appears as an important link in
the transmission of this word. This presence of the word in his writings can be taken to support the
hypothesis that it is in 'Iraq that the transmission of this term to the Muslim mystics was most likely
effected. Nevertheless, one must admit that such speculations rest on extremely fragile bases.
xiii
There has been much discussion as to whether Ibn 'Arabic was or was not a pantheist. We
believe that it is a false debate for there are various ways of defining pantheism, which is a term used
in Occidental philosophy. This term is inappropriate when it is projected upon Muslim or Indian
philosophy. On the other hand, we are not in agreement with the rejection of the expression
“existential monism” because this term effectively translates the Arabic “wah.dat al-wujuud” which we
consider to be altogether appropriate to describe the thought of Ibn 'Arabi, on the condition that
certain nuances are introduced. Of course there are various ways to interpret Ibn 'Arabi, and certain
Sufi sects which made use of his teaching, particularly in the epoch of Bahá’u’lláh, were clearly
pantheists, not in saying that God is present in all sensible realities, which is one thesis, but in saying
that in the sensible realities there exists nothing but God, which is another thesis. Bahá’u’lláh very
explicitly refuted this point. It is true that Ibn 'Arabi taught the unity of Being (wujuud), but not the
unicity of Being (mawjud) or of the beings. However, Being present in the being, one falls rapidly
upon difficulties which are practically impossible to surmount and upon which we will not extend

ourselves here.

xivTranslator’s Note: Baha’u’llah, “Lawh-i-Hikmat”, in Tablets of Baha’u’llah revealed after the

Kitab-i-Aqdas: “Say: Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the
Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs
for men of discernment. Nature is God’s Will and is its expression in and through the

contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise.
Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being, no one
should question this assertion. It is endowed with a power whose reality men of learning fail to
grasp. Indeed a man of insight can perceive naught therein save the effulgent splendor of Our
Name, the Creator. Say: This is an existence which knoweth no decay, and Nature itself is lost
in bewilderment before its revelations, its compelling evidences and its effulgent glory which have
encompassed the universe."

xvTranslator's Note: 'Abdu'l-Baha, "Some Answered Questions", Chapter 16: "The other kind of

human knowledge is that of intelligible things; that is, it consists of intelligible realities which have
no outward form or place and which are not sensible. For example, the power of the mind is not
sensible, nor are any of the human attributes: These are intelligible realities. Love, likewise, is an
intelligible and not a sensible reality. For the ear does not hear these realities, the eye does not see
them, the smell does not sense them, the taste does not detect them, the touch does not perceive
them. Even the ether, the forces of which are said in natural philosophy to be heat, light,
electricity, and magnetism, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. Likewise, nature itself
is an intelligible and not a sensible reality; the human spirit is an intelligible and not a
sensible reality."

xviTranslator's Note: Baha'u'llah, "Kitab-i-Iqan", pp. 1-2: "No man shall attain the shores of the

ocean of true understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth.
Sanctify your souls, O ye peoples of the world, that haply ye may attain that station which
God hath destined for you and enter thus the tabernacle which, according to the dispensations of
Providence, hath been raised in the firmament of the Bayán. The essence of these words is this:
they that tread the path of faith, they that thirst for the wine of certitude, must cleanse
themselves of all that is earthly—their ears from idle talk, their minds from

vain
imaginings, their hearts from worldly affections, their eyes from that which perisheth. They
should put their trust in God, and, holding fast unto Him, follow in His way. Then will
they be made worthy of the effulgent glories of the sun of divine knowledge and understanding,
and become the recipients of a grace that is infinite and unseen, inasmuch as man can never
hope to attain unto the knowledge of the All-Glorious, can never quaff from the stream of divine
knowledge and wisdom, can never enter the abode of immortality, nor partake of the cup of
divine nearness and favor, unless and until he ceases to regard the words and deeds of mortal
men as a standard for the true understanding and recognition of God and His Prophets."

xvii

The expression "kullu shay" in the numerological system of abjad (arithmology, also called
gematria and jafs), has for its value 361, which is the number of the infinite because it is composed
of 19 times 19. The number 19 is named by the Bab a "unity" (vahid), for in this arithmological
system a number is always reducible to the sum of the digits of which it is composed, only 9
taking the value of 0, as in the proof by 9. Thus 9 is, at the same time, the greatest unity which

recapitulates in itself all the digits, thus the power of infinity; and the hidden digit which effaces
itself in the arithmological result. Nineteen (19) is thus equal to 1 (the unity), for 1 plus 9 is 1 plus
0 which is 1. Nineteen (19) is thus equal to the unity, while at the same time containing all the
power of infinity which permits it to engender other monads equal to itself. The first unity was
that of the Letters of the Living (huruf-i-hayy), made up of the Bab and his first eighteen disciples.
The word "hayy" has the value 18 and the Bab was the 1 which completed the Vahid (Unity)—
thus 18 plus 1—or the "point" (nuqtih) which identifies the B in the first verse and invocation of
the Qur'an (the B of Bismi'llah). This first Unity constituted the "manifest Unity" (Vahid-i-mubin) or
the "model Unity" (Vahid-i-mubayin), which might also be called

“explanatory,” “paradigmatic,”
or “archetypal,” depending on the manner in which one vocalizes the letters
MBYN. This first
Unity, in a metaphorical manner, had for its function the transmission of new
life to all things by
multiplying itself, 19 by 19. Thus, “the secret” of “all things” is
hidden in the first “vahid”, and
this secret is nothing other than the “Countenance of God”, alluding to the
Qur'anic verse: “All
things shall perish except for His Countenance (wajhahu)…” (Qur'an 28:88)
For more details on
these numerological calculations, see Abbas Amanat, “Resurrection and
Renewal: The Making
of the Bábí Movement, 1844-1850” (Ithaca and London, 1989, pp. 191-193).
The expression “all
things” appears among the first verses of the Persian Bayan (Bayan-i-farsi,
I:1:1), and is found
thereafter in an incalculable number of the Bab's verses. The not altogether
satisfactory
explanation given to this expression by Nicolas is found in the first volume of
his translation of
the Persian Bayan (Le Bayan persan, tome I, pp. 7-9). The Persian Bayan is
itself divided into 9
units called Vahid, each one subdivided into 19 chapters (abwab), with the
exception of the last,
composed of 10 abwab, which “Him Whom God shall manifest” must complete. To
be complete,
reflecting the principle of “kullu shay “, the Persian Bayan should have 19
Vahid each composed of
19 abwab. Bahá’u’lláh completed the Persian Bayan in substance through
the revelation of the
Book of Certitude, but in an entirely different form, containing neither the
Vahid nor the abwab.
The purpose of this number symbolism is for the divine Word to recapitulate in
a symbolic
manner the entire creation of which it is the motive power. The Badi' calendar,
revealed by the
Bab in the Persian Bayan, and adopted and elaborated by the Bahá’ís, is
composed of 19 months
of 19 days, to which are added the intercalary days, either four or five
depending on the year.

xviiiTranslator’s Note: As far as I know, the only authoritative Baha’i
interpretation of the opening

verses of Kitab-i-Aqdas is the reference to them by 'Abdu'l-Baha in “Some
Answered Questions”
(chapter 65, p. 149):

Question: It is said in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: “…whoso is deprived thereof, hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed”. What is the meaning of this verse?

Answer: The meaning of this blessed verse is that the foundation of success and salvation is the recognition of God, and that good deeds, which are the fruit of faith, derive from this recognition.

When this recognition is not attained, man remains veiled from God and, as he is veiled, his good works fail to achieve their full and desired effect. This verse does not mean that those who are veiled from God are all equal, whether they be doers of good or workers of iniquity. It means only that the foundation is the recognition of God and that good deeds derive from this knowledge. Nevertheless, it is certain that among those who are veiled from God there is a difference between the doer of good and the sinner and malefactor. For the veiled soul who is endowed with good character and conduct merits the forgiveness of God, while the veiled sinner possessed of

bad character and conduct will be deprived of the bounties and bestowals of God. Herein lies the difference.

This blessed verse means, therefore, that good deeds alone, without the recognition of God, cannot lead to eternal redemption, to everlasting success and salvation, and to admittance into the Kingdom of God.

First of all, 'Abdu'l-Baha clearly does not state that the theme of this verse is that every person is required to recognize Baha'u'llah as a Manifestation of God...he says that it refers to “the recognition of God”, which could be the recognition of any of the Manifestations of God, or, for that matter, of other signs and evidences of God in other created beings. He doesn't dwell on this though, and then goes on to make some remarkable statements. Secondly, he says that good deeds are the fruit of the recognition of God. It follows that bad deeds are not. To quote: “...while the veiled sinner possessed of bad character and conduct will be deprived of the bounties and bestowals of God.” “Conduct” is the evidence of “character” and not avowals of belief. Thirdly, he states that “This verse does not mean that those who are veiled from God are all equal, whether they be doers of good or workers of

iniquity.” Again, the standard is whether a person does good or not. Fourthly, the unbelievers (hear! hear!) are not cut all from the same cloth: “among those who are veiled from God there is a difference between the doer of good and the sinner and malefactor.” What we do is what we are. Fifthly, it is better if we believe and do good, because that way we not only reap benefits in this life and world but also in the kingdom of God: “good deeds alone, without the recognition of God, cannot lead to eternal redemption, to everlasting success and salvation, and to admittance into the Kingdom of God.” Interesting that Baha'u'llah uses the word ['irfan] to refer to the “recognition” of the Manifestation of God, and that 'Abdu'l-Baha refers to this as “the recognition of God”. It is in this context that the principle might be viewed in its philosophical significance for the present study.

xix Please see: Chapter V of this work, in which we write about Shaykhism. Haji Mirza Karim Khan-i-Kirmani was profoundly opposed to the Bábís and Bahá’ís, and he encouraged persecution of them. He traveled upon the same boat as the Bab when the latter was making his pilgrimage to Mecca, and is reported to have behaved towards the Bab in a particularly offensive manner. He made himself generally so unsufferable towards the passengers that they wanted to throw him overboard! It was the Bab who intervened to save his life. His arrogance was legendary. After the passing of the Bab and the emergence of Bahá’u’lláh, he devoted much energy to attacking Bahá’u’lláh and his teachings. Bahá’u’lláh responded to him in the Tablet of Contentment (Lawh-i-Qana'), reproduced by 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari in “Aqlah al-Falah,” pp. 94-104.

xx The word 'awwam designates people without instruction and without social distinction. One can also translate it as “ignorant ones”. Certain writers have wished to depict Karim Khan-i-Kirmani as a precursor of modernism because, in the introduction to his book, he states that he wrote it in Persian instead of Arabic and in a simple style so that the simple people and “even the women” might read it. Certain ones have also believed that Karim Khan was the defender

of public
education and in particular the education of women. It suffices to read his writings to see that he
shares the same prejudices as the intellectuals of his time, all of whom were in favor of the
cloistering of women. If a comparison of the “modernity” of Karim Khan and Bahá’u’lláh is in
order, we find that Bahá’u’lláh is clearly more “modern,” as he
forbids the wearing of the veil,
proscribes cloistering, declares that the education of girls is more important for the future of
humanity than that of boys, and calls for equal participation of women in the administration of

public affairs, for women being given the right to vote, and to serve on Bahá’í institutions.
xxi
The “transcendence” that permits us to go beyond the mechanisms of intuitive and discursive
thought is not particular to mysticism, but is found at the source of all of the great scientific
discoveries. This transcendence is allied to what G. Holton calls “gushing” (cf. L'imagination
scientifique, Paris, 1981, p. 233). The transcendence permits one to go beyond the discontinuity that
exists between the intuitive and discursive processes. Only intuition permits us to break free of
logical frameworks of a tradition in order to “see” what can be thought of outside of them. The role
of the active imagination consists then of “grasping” the new object of thought in order to bring it to
the rational plan in which a new language is created in an ad hoc manner which can restore it. D.
Hofstater (cf. Godel, Escher, Bach, Paris, 1985), who systematized the ideas of G. Bateson (cf. Vers une
Ecologie de l'Esprit, Paris, volume 1-1977, volume 2-1984), spoke of a state of thought similar to this
transcendence which he calls “the U-mode” (unmode). The U-mode can not be thought, but we can
think with it. This is a mode of thought in which the subject is liberated from the constraints of
rational thought, and which permits the surmounting of paradoxes upon which the logic of logico-
mathematical systems inevitably falls (cf. L. Vernet, la Malle de Newton, Paris, 1993, pp. 281-284).
This transcendence in many ways seems to be an attempt to walk upon the void.

This is why it
necessitates an act of faith.

xxiiTranslator’s Note: Pelagius (fl. c. 390-418) was a British-born ascetic moralist, who became

well known throughout ancient Rome. He opposed the idea of predestination and asserted a
strong version of the doctrine of free will. He was accused by Augustine of Hippo and others of
denying the need for divine aid in performing good works. They understood him to have said
that the only grace necessary was the declaration of the law; humans were not wounded by
Adam's sin and were perfectly able to fulfill the law without divine aid. Pelagius denied
Augustine's theory of original sin. His adherents cited Deuteronomy 24:16 in support of their
position. Pelagius was declared a heretic by the Council of Carthage. His interpretation of a
doctrine of free will became known as Pelagianism.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelagius]

xxiiiTranslator’s Note: Democritus (/dI'm?krIt??s/; Greek:
??u??????? Demókritos, meaning
“chosen of the people”; c. 460 – c. 370 BC) was an influential Ancient Greek pre-Socratic
philosopher primarily remembered today for his formulation of an atomic theory of the universe.
Democritus was born in Abdera, Thrace around 460 BC. His exact contributions are difficult to
disentangle from those of his mentor Leucippus, as they are often mentioned together in texts.
Their speculation on atoms, taken from Leucippus, bears a passing and partial resemblance to
the nineteenth-century understanding of atomic structure that has led some to regard
Democritus as more of a scientist than other Greek philosophers; however, their ideas rested on
very different bases. Largely ignored in ancient Athens, Democritus was nevertheless well known
to his fellow northern-born philosopher Aristotle. Plato is said to have disliked him so much that
he wished all his books burned. Many consider Democritus to be the “father of modern science”.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democritus]
xxiv
Mufawadat, p. 113; SAQ:XXXVII:172. The Persian text says: “anvar 'ibarat az

tamavvajat-i-
maddiy-i-athiriyyih ast". The Grand Dictionnaire Universel Larousse of 1872 defines ether in the
following manner: "an eminently elastic substance and of an excessively weak density, which would be extended
throughout space, even in the most perfect void, and would fill the pores which separate the molecules from the

ponderable bodies. Heat, light, electricity would no longer be substances, but the results of the vibrational movements
particularly imprinted by this universal fluid; even as sound is not [a kind of] matter but a movement impressed
upon matter". The word comes from the Greek aither which gave us aether in Latin and athir in
Arabic. The root of the word is Indo-European and is found in the Sanskrit idh, indh, signifying
"to enflame", "to burn". For Anaxagoras, ether was the principle of fire. Plato made of it a
substance more subtle than air. The concept of ether played a large role in the physics of the 19th
century when, under the influence of the experiments of Young and of Frenel, the corpusculary
theory of light was abandoned for the ondulatory theory. Today we know that the photons which
constitute light have a behavior which can be described at the same time in terms of waves and of
particles. The remark of 'Abdu'l-Baha thus conforms to the science of His time. However,
modern physics has abandoned the concept of ether. We must here understand ether as a
philosophical principle and not as a physical entity, in the same way that the atoms of
Democritus were above all philosophical concepts. Furthermore, it is possible to reinterpret this
philosophical concept of ether in the framework of the mechanism of fields in considering ether
as the totality of the properties of the quantum void. The definition which 'Abdu'l-Baha gives of
ether in His Tablet to Professor Auguste Forel is very different from that of the Larousse of 1872.
While this one defines ether as "an eminently elastic substance", 'Abdu'l-Baha ranks ether in the
category of "forces unseen of the eye…that cannot be sensed, that cannot be seen" but "from the
effects it produceth, that is from its waves and vibrations" it is "made evident." (Tablet to Dr. Forel,

pp. 19-20) This definition seems to understand ether to be a more fundamental energy than the
energy of which particles are composed. Perhaps there is a way to establish a parallel with the
quantum fields.
xxv
The word mahiyyat, traditionally translated by quiddities, is fairly difficult to define because its
meaning fluctuates a great deal from the 16th century onwards. The term is fabricated from the
Arabic “ma huwa?” [meaning] “what is he?” which is the translation of Aristotle's question “to ti
einai?” The expression “quiddity” thus has a long history as much in Muslim as in Christian
Scholasticism. The word “quiddity” was introduced by the Latin translators of Ibn Sina, and is
formed from quid (what thing), the question quid sit? aiming to define the thing in itself; which is to
say “the essence in so far as it is distinguishable from existence” (Lalande, Vocabulaire technique et
critique de la philosophie, 9th edition, Paris, 1962, p. 873). The Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXeme
siecle (Paris, 1875, volume XIII, p. 541) gives the following commentary [on this term]:
“Scholasticism understood by this word the essential and distinct character, the very nature of a
thing…A being is not only being, but this being, determined, particular, concrete; the totality of
the conditions from which this character results is quiddity. Quiddity differs from quality, not
only because it is the essential and distinctive quality, but further because it encompasses
altogether, as an indivisible whole, that which constitutes this being, the being with its own
determination, the substance with its attributes, the matter with its form—matter being nothing
without form, nor form without matter.”

— The Archeology of the Kingdom of God (Used by permission of the curator)