

Commentary on the Kitab-i Aqdas, verse one

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Commentary on the Kitab-i Aqdas, verse one

Sen McGlinn

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Some thoughts on Aqdas Verse #1, culled from many sources. Original text in bold. I have attributed comments here and there, but this is mainly for my own use: the words given may not be literally those of the person to whom they are attributed, and some are from my notes of talks heard at conferences or personal discussions. Beware of any references to Arabic, since I'm drawing from the reservoir of my own ignorance. EM means Elder and Miller's translation [note from ed.: this translation available online here -J.W.], 'Wehr' is a good Arabic dictionary, and you will have to guess the other initials. -S.M.

"IN THE NAME OF HIM WHO IS THE SUPREME RULER"

The root, HKM, is also the general word for law(s), or in some contexts ruling, judgement.

"OVER ALL THAT HATH BEEN AND ALL THAT IS TO BE"

Literally, in his name who is the ruler of what was and is/is to be

To begin "in the Name of God" is Qur'anic. Here, God is identified as the "ruler" (al-hakim), emphasizing His authority in this world, which underpins the authority of His revealed laws.- JC

The fact that the Qur'an begins 'In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful', while the Aqdas begins with HKM, 'rule' or 'law', already establishes

one theme of the first part of the Aqdas: the argument against those who hold that mystical nearness to God supersedes or is opposed to laws and obedience.

"THE FIRST DUTY PRESCRIBED BY GOD FOR HIS SERVANTS"

Servants are 'abaada: The EM translation has 'creatures', which is a weak translation. Wehr has slave, servant, for the singular and 'humanity' for the plural which is used here. The verb form 'abada has the meaning of either serving or worshipping. Thus humanity is conceived of as those who

worship/serve
God: homo religiosa.

"IS THE RECOGNITION" ...('irfanu)

The most fundamental prescription is recognition of the authority of the one through whom these laws are revealed. But "recognition" is a pale and inadequate rendering of 'irfan. The word has rich resonances in Sufi mysticism, and might best be glossed as "mystical insight." It is not a prosaic "recognition," but primal recognition in the soul, a re-cognition. It might be compared to the Buddhist Bodhi or enlightenment. So the first duty is not a legal one, not to recite a creed like "There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Prophet", in Islam. What is wanted is not a confession of outward faith but nothing less than the attainment of a mystical insight into the Manifestation of God. The use of 'irfan here is paralleled in the short obligatory prayer, "I bear witness O my God that Thou has created me to know Thee and to worship Thee." "to know Thee" is "li 'irfanika", "to attain mystical insight into You." - JC The word 'irfan ("recognition") in the first verse clearly carries a good deal of weight. It is not the "affirmation" (shahada) that is the corresponding Islamic concept. It is a term with mystical connotations, implying a knowledge that has a strong experiential and existential content. -JW

In case we are unsure that a spiritual recognition is meant here, K55 explains: Know ye from what heights your Lord, the All-Glorious, is calling? Think ye that ye have recognized the Pen wherewith your Lord, the Lord of all names, commandeth you? Nay, by My life! Did ye but know it, ye would renounce the world, and would hasten with your whole hearts to the presence of the Well-Beloved. Your spirits would be so transported by His Word as to throw into commotion the Greater World--how much more this small and petty one!

"Recognition" is probably the best English word we can use without forcing a certain "level" of recognition on the believers. That is, especially in the case of new converts, the process of recognition may well advance through various stages ..-Stephen R Bedingfield

Recognition is very primordial, it is a recollection, much akin to the Greek position of re-mem-bering. It seems to have a direct link to the Persian Hidden Words, #19 where we are re-minded of "that true and radiant morn", the archetypal *alast*, of our pre-existence. To re-collect this is indeed very existential, it thrusts us to the core of our beingness. -Theo Cope

In the Tablet of Seven Questions, Bahá'u'lláh says "The beginning of all things is the *worship* of God which followeth upon the recognition of Him" (BSB June 93, p 49). Attempts to do other things first have not been rewarded with marked success. See my innumerable papers on building the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar.

"OF HIM WHO IS THE DAYSPRING OF HIS REVELATION " (mashriqi wahyihi)

Since this
is my commentary, every mention of the Mashriq will get a double emphasis ;-D.
The Mashriq as a building and the Manifestation as a person are different
expressions of the same thing: "But the real Collective Centers are the
Manifestations of God, of whom the church or temple is a symbol and expression.
That is to say, the Manifestation of God is the real Divine Temple and
Collective Center of which the outer church is but a symbol. (Star of the West,
Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 7)

"AND THE FOUNTAIN OF HIS LAWS, WHO REPRESENTETH THE GODHEAD"

The Manifestation stands in the stead of God on this earth. That Bahá'u'lláh
is in the station (maqam) of the Self of God serves as a denial that
Bahá'u'lláh

is God, tout court. "Nafsu'llah", the Self of God, in Bahá'u'lláh's usage,
refers to the totality of His manifest Names and Attributes, but not to His
unknowable Essence.

The Arabic word "nafs" or "self" derives from the verb nafasa, to breathe. In
the age of Harun al-Rashid, when the great translations from Greek philosophy
were carried out, "nafs" was used to translate the Greek psyche, and inevitably
took on some of that semantic weight. -JC

"IN BOTH THE KINGDOM OF HIS CAUSE" (fi 'alami 'l-amri = in the world of
command)

The world of Command or 'Alam al-Amr was in the Sufi metaphysics of Ibn
'Arabi an intermediate realm between the world of God's essence and the world
of contingent creation. 'Alam al-Amr corresponds to the realm of the
Manifestations of God in Bahá'í thought. The Guardian sometimes translated
Amr as Command, sometimes as Cause. It bears both meanings in Babi Arabic.

"AND THE WORLD OF CREATION"

There is a parallel in Gleanings II: "The
beginning of all things is the knowledge of God, and the end of all things is
strict observance of whatsoever hath been sent down from the empyrean of the
Divine Will that pervadeth all that is in the heavens and all that is on the
earth."

"WHOSO ACHIEVETH THIS DUTY HATH ATTAINED UNTO ALL GOOD;"

But the recognition is not given to obtain 'all good': "Worship thou God in
such wise that if thy
worship lead thee to the fire, no alteration in thine adoration would be
produced, and so likewise if thy recompense should be paradise. Thus and thus
alone should be the worship which befitteth the one True God. Shouldst thou
worship Him because of fear, this would be unseemly in the sanctified Court of
His presence, and could not be regarded as an act by thee dedicated to the
Oneness of His Being. Or if thy gaze should be on paradise, and thou shouldst
worship Him while cherishing such a hope, thou wouldst make God's creation a

partner with Him, notwithstanding the fact that paradise is desired by men.
(Selections from the Writings of the Bab, pp. 77-78)

There is a hadith by Imam Ali which states that: " All Good, it's beginning and it's end ... is the Promised One." The Bab refers to this hadith in His famous commentary on the Suratu'l-Bakara. The exact passage appears on page 41 of E.G Browne's collection. In the third bab of the second Vahid of the Arabic Bayan, He says "Say all good refers to Me". In the same book, in bab 6 of the 2nd Vahid, He says " All Good is to be under the shadow of the one whom God shall make manifest". The most precise passage appears in the following passage of the same book: "In the year nine you shall attain to all good." - Habib K36 also says that good deeds performed in the hope of appearing righteous in the world or staking a claim to acceptance by God are futile:

K 36: By the righteousness of the one true God! Were anyone to wash the feet of all mankind, and were he to worship God in the forests, valleys, and mountains, upon high hills and lofty peaks, to leave no rock or tree, no clod of earth, but was a witness to his worship--yet, should the fragrance of My good pleasure not be inhaled from him, his works would never be acceptable unto God. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Lord of all. How many a man hath secluded himself in the climes of India, denied himself the things that God hath decreed as lawful, imposed upon himself austerities and mortifications, and hath not been remembered by God, the Revealer of Verses. Make not your deeds as snares wherewith to entrap the object of your aspiration, and deprive not yourselves of this Ultimate Objective for which have ever yearned all such as have drawn nigh unto God. Say: The very life of all deeds is My good pleasure, and all things depend upon Mine acceptance. Read ye the Tablets that ye may know what hath been purposed in the Books of God, the All-Glorious, the Ever-Bounteous. He who attaineth to My love hath title to a throne of gold, to sit thereon in honour over all the world; he who is deprived thereof, though he sit upon the dust, that dust would seek refuge with God, the Lord of all Religions.

"AND WHOSO IS DEPRIVED THEREOF HATH GONE ASTRAY, THOUGH HE BE THE AUTHOR OF EVERY RIGHTEOUS DEED"

There is a commentary on this by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Some Answered Questions chapter 65, p. 238: Question.--It is said in the Kitab-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.--This blessed verse means that the foundation of success and salvation is the knowledge of God, and that the results of the knowledge of God are the good actions which are the fruits of faith.

If man has not this knowledge, he will be separated from God, and when this separation exists, good actions have not complete effect. This verse does not mean that the souls separated from God are equal, whether they perform good or bad actions. It signifies only that the foundation is to know God, and the good actions result from this knowledge. Nevertheless, it is certain that between

the

good, the sinners and the wicked who are veiled from God there is a difference. For the veiled one who has good principles and character deserves the pardon of God, while he who is a sinner, and has bad qualities and character, is deprived of the bounties and blessings of God. Herein lies the difference.

Therefore, the blessed verse means that good actions alone, without the knowledge of God, cannot be the cause of eternal salvation, everlasting success, and prosperity, and entrance into the Kingdom of God. (ends)

Another possibly relevant passage by Bahá'u'lláh (especially relevant if one considers, as I do, that the first audience for the book was the Babi community)

is translated by Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By*: "If all who are in heaven and on earth," ... "be invested in this day with the powers and attributes destined for the Letters of the Bayan, ... and if they one and all should, swift as the twinkling of an eye, hesitate to recognize My Revelation, they shall be accounted, in the sight of God, of those that have gone astray, and regarded as 'Letters of Negation.'"

Other commentaries and thoughts: There is no implication here that non-Bahá'ís are damned. First of all, there is no clear doctrine of "salvation"

in the Bahá'í faith; since we are not born with original sin, what would we be

saved from? What is being spoken of here is the *acceptability of our faith and of our works before God.* Well, of course, we are nothingness itself, and we are

not acceptable. But if we join our faith in Bahá'u'lláh to obedience to His laws, this faith and these acts will be acceptable. We are still dependent on God's *grace* for our "salvation." And non-Bahá'ís are also dependent on God's

grace for their salvation. The only difference is that our proffering of faith and works to God is a priori acceptable. This is a sort of prevenient grace (acceptance is still an act of grace). Non-believers are still distinguished according to good and bad deeds, according to SAQ 65. SAQ 63-64 indicate that this combination lends some extra "velocity" to spiritual progress. But all these things are relative. Everything in the Writings points to the possibility of spiritual progress in any religion; Bahá'u'lláh at one point criticizes Hindus for rightly recognizing that all religions are one and then consigning to

hell anyone who eats beef. -JC

In terms of salvation, statements that may appear to imply that the Bahá'í Faith provides the only route to salvation must be tempered with explicit statements that would suggest otherwise. The first paragraph of the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* ...taken at face value, would imply that salvation is dependent on

recognition of Bahá'u'lláh and living according to his laws and teachings. However, in the context of Bahá'u'lláh's other writings, this interpretation would appear to be misrepresentative. There are statements that imply other religionists are saved: *Blessed is the man who . . . hath turned towards Him [Christ]* (WOB 186); Muhammad is *the Ark of Salvation* (Abdu'l-Bahá, SDC 53); the Quran *the Way of God unto all who are in the heavens and all who are on earth* (Gleanings 44). Salvation is variously dependent on Huququ'llah (no. 22), the acquisition of *goodly qualities and traits of character* (Trustworthiness no. 23), the acknowledgement of God and goodly deeds (Gleanings 86-7). Moreover the Bahá'í writings teach that salvation is not static, that the *sinner* can be

saved at his last breath and the *devout believer* *fall to the nethermost fire*

(Iqan 194-5). Significantly the Bab refers to the eternal challenge of salvation: *whose holdeth fast unto His allegiance, he hath attained and *will* attain salvation in all the worlds* (The Bab, Selections 85, emphasis added). Salvation is, therefore, from a Bahai viewpoint a complex area and the Bahá'í writings do not offer one understanding of the concept of salvation nor do they suggest that there is one route. - Seena Fazel, from paper on exclusivist texts,

Newcastle Religious Studies meeting, December 1993.

There is a parallel in the Suratu'l-Haykal, which is addressed specifically to the Babis. There, Bahá'u'lláh warned them that God's acceptance of their pious deeds is dependent on their belief in Him.

It is not at all obvious that Bahá'u'lláh would have seen a tremendous ethical difference between following the laws of one religion over following the laws of another. Bahá'u'lláh was thoroughly repelled by the obsession with religious minutiae characteristic of Islamic law. Prayer is important. Fasting is important. Cleanliness is important. Whether a mouse falling into your cistern makes your ablutions invalid is not important. An indication of this is the palpable lack of enthusiasm that Bahá'u'lláh showed for promulgating laws.

This policy -- that the implementation of the Bahá'í Shari'a is a low priority--is followed to this day by the House. Further, it seems quite clear that Bahá'u'lláh considered basic religious laws to be eternal matters, modified

in practice by successive prophets but not fundamentally changed--i.e., daily prayer, fasting, marriage, etc., are obligations imposed by the greater, not the

lesser, covenant. So, in an important sense, this verse refers to accepting the Prophets, not rejecting those who have not accepted *the* Prophet, and thus does

not provide a proof text for an exclusivist interpretation of the Faith. -JW

In the Persian Bayan, Wahid V chapter 4, the Bab writes

that 'Nothing can attain to its own Paradise unless it reaches the utmost limit of perfection possible to it. The perfection of the supremacy of man is in faith

in God." Thus someone who performs all good works, but has no faith in God, still has not achieved the potential which is inherent in all humans - whereas our potential to perform 'all good works' varies from one person to another: since we do not know the extent even of our own capacity as regards works, we cannot judge another. The believer who is a great trial to us MIGHT have fulfilled his or her capacity in respect of both faith and works.

"IT BEHOVETH EVERYONE"

The 1992 edition has "every one". This will be corrected to 'everyone' in the next printing.

"WHO REACHETH THIS MOST SUBLIME STATION, THIS SUMMIT OF TRANSCENDENT GLORY, TO OBSERVE EVERY ORDINANCE OF HIM WHO IS THE DESIRE OF THE WORLD"

Bahá'u'lláh

denies the Pauline and Shi'ite doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Rather,

works and faith must go together. There is a strong strain in history of Christian antinomianism deriving from the Pauline doctrine. In Shi'ite Islam it was often asserted that anyone who weeps for Imam Husayn is saved. There was also an important strain of antinomianism in Babism after the death of the Bab. Historical materials attest to Babi preachers saying that the essence of Babism is that the laws have been turned upside down. One group, the 'Ayanis, were explicitly against law, and defined themselves against the Bayanis. Some emissaries of Azal in the early 1850s also are reported as preaching a reversal or suspension of the Law. Some Babis drank alcohol, and engaged in other illicit

behavior, not excluding murder. Bahá'u'lláh here is attempting to forestall any

similar Bahá'í antinomianism by insisting on works. But he is also attempting to

bring the rest of the Babis into the Bahá'í faith by insisting on recognition of

Himself as the fount of revelation. -JC

In Gleaning CXXXIV, the first duty is recognition, and the second is "steadfastness in His Cause." This is echoed in the Huququ'llah compilation:

O people, the first duty is to recognize the one true God - magnified be His glory - the second is to show forth constancy in His Cause and, after these, one's duty is to purify one's riches and earthly possessions according to that which is prescribed by God. Therefore it beseemeth thee to meet thine obligation

to the Right of God first, then to direct thy steps toward His blessed House.

Thus the sequence is 1. Recognition (irfan), 2. constancy/obedience - where the synonym of constancy implies that 'obedience' means primarily the attitude of

submission rather than achieving observance of the letter, since otherwise 3. and 4. would be included under 2. 3. payment of huququllah 4. pilgrimage - and by implication other religious duties such as obligatory prayer?

"THESE TWIN DUTIES"

It is de rigueur to note here the parallel between the twin duties of the individual soul at this point and the twin duties of the community at paragraphs 30 and 31: to establish the house of justice and build the houses of worship.

"ARE INSEPARABLE. NEITHER IS ACCEPTABLE WITHOUT THE OTHER"

This may also have the effect of fusing together the two schools of tariqat (eg. Sufism) and shari'at (jurists) into a single community. One may at any rate hope... It does not mean that the deeds of Christians, Muslims and others are not recognized by God, since in the 8th Bisharat Bahá'u'lláh says: "The pious deeds of the monks and priests among the followers of the Spirit... are remembered in His presence."

"THUS HATH IT BEEN DECREED BY HIM WHO IS THE SOURCE OF DIVINE INSPIRATION."

and so say all of us :-)

Sen

K1 to K5 are translated by Shoghi Effendi, in Gleanings CLV. The texts are identical except for typographical corrections (Dayspring rather than day spring). We should remember to discuss the composition of the first 17 paragraphs when we come to para 17, which seems to mark the end of this unit of composition.

Bausani's translation, in EI2 lemma 'Bahais' reads: "The first commandment of God to his servants is knowledge of the Dawn of His revelation, and the Dayspring of His Decree (i.e., of the Prophet), who is his appointed Representative in the created world. He who has attained this knowledge has attained all good. He who knows it not is of the world of error, even though he performs all (good) works".

This verse is discussed in Taherzadeh, 'Covenant' 266, and by Jalil Mahmoudi 'Irfan' in World Order 7:4 (1973).

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