

Why We Need Baha'i Theology

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Why We Need Bahá'í Theology

Jack McLean

1995

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

In my view, some ill-founded prejudices within the Bahá'í community — prejudices that seem at long last to be dissipating — have may impeded the development of the sacred study. Theology admittedly carries heavy historical baggage. It may appear as a fearful prospect to those who are concerned that it will become either a tool of division or a refuge for a pseudo-clerical intellectual elite, or become a weighty impediment to free thought. Some may have also too hastily concluded that the voluminous Bahá'í writings with their authorised interpretations have put an end to theology rather than setting it on a new foundation which calls for new and creative interpretations. Further, academic protectionism from those who might resent a perceived intrusion of theology into other areas of the Bahá'í curriculum may also be a factor. In spite of these negative perceptions, however, Bahá'í theology in the decade of the nineties is beginning to move ahead in stride, as it should.

One of the major requirements of Bahá'í theology at the present time is diversification. Conspicuously lacking are approaches that might best be described as existential, that is, theologies that deal with the personal self

as subject, and particularly as living and acting subject, rather than the rational self, the thinking subject who is concerned mainly with the objectification of thought. This existential approach would address the question of personal being and elucidate the existential moment, that moment of crisis that is fraught with possibilities during which we are faced with accepting or rejecting spiritual values, or finding meaning in the midst of an unpredictable and sometimes hostile world. For surely theology should also have something to say about the stark, real moments of our existence which make all of our theoretical concerns insignificant by comparison.

The present leading analytical trend in scholarship, however, tends to deal with the Bahá'í teachings either as a series of cognitive questions to be analyzed and resolved, or as historical studies on the Shi'íh origins of the Bábí-Bahá'í Faiths, or text rooted studies that elucidate scripture, or combinations of these. While such studies are no doubt essential and have set standards of excellence, it would seem timely for a religion that claims a universal vision to bring the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to the other world religions more to the center of the discussion, as well as issues of philosophical theology. The Shi'íh theological roots of the Bábí Faith, while clearly important as historical antecedents of the faith of Bahá'u'lláh, are likely to be of little interest to the several world spiritual cultures of both Judaism and Christianity as well as to the adherents of the other major religions of Asia.

The whole question of the authority of Bahá'u'lláh's prophetic office and his presumption to define metaphysical and spiritual truth looms large in this discussion, and has implications both for the content of Bahá'í studies as well as its method. For those who have read his writings carefully, it is hard to escape the notice that Bahá'u'lláh has presumed to define the veracity of world religious doctrine. Although those who favour the position of a non-normative religious relativism will view Bahá'u'lláh's claim to distinguish the true from the false as a great deal of presumption, we should nonetheless not be surprised at his claim. Every Prophet of God has redressed what he has viewed to be error. Indeed, the whole history of religion might be viewed as a continual process of adjustment to the truth, just one of the several facets of progressive revelation. Bahá'u'lláh also maintains the relativity of religious truth which tends to deabsolutize normative statements. It would seem imperative, consequently, to postulate how the more categorical, absolutistic statements in the Bahá'í writings interact with the teaching of the relativity of religious truth. It is too facile an approach to just ignore the absolutistic statements because they may be perceived as being too dogmatic, triumphalist or categorical, or selectively emphasize others so that they might relativize the strong scriptural declarations.

Further, Bahá'u'lláh's theology has certain implications for the current dialogue of the world religions which has currently reached something of an impasse. Despite the increased recognition in the post world war two period that there is salvation, truth and grace in traditions other than our own, the

incompatibilities and contradictions of the teachings of the world's religions have created some formidable doctrinal insolubilities. The old authority centers have been knocked askew in the encounter of the world faiths, creating a kind of spiritual vacuum that awaits fulfilment. Bahá'u'lláh's metaphysical paradigm of the unity of the world faiths can provide a new and authoritative synthesis that would have profound implications for world theology, and act as a catalyst for inter-faith unity.

In spite of the crying need to elaborate a universal metaphysic of meaning, some still feel that we do not need a new theology. But I am convinced that we do, just as surely as we needed what `Abdu'l-Bahá called "new" teachings to usher in this present age. This new theology destined to emerge as Bahá'í scholarship continues to evolve is likely to continue along the piecemeal lines of the present trend until systematic theologies are developed. At that point other truly universal theologies will emerge that will perform a synthesis of the religions of East and West seen in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. For if, as Shoghi Effendi has written, the Kitáb-i-Iqán "has laid down a broad and unassailable foundation for the complete and permanent reconciliation" of the followers of the world's great religions (God Passes By 139), the conclusion is inescapable that Bahá'í scholars will have to elaborate theologies that are able to reconcile the spiritual teachings of East and West. Shoghi Effendi himself has stated that the Iqán acquaints us with "some of the basic theological problems of the Faith". It is, therefore, indispensable to every student of the Movement." (letter to an individual 10/1/33 Bahá'í International Archives) This phrase can be read as a clear signal to undertake theological study.

The other point concerns the role of apologetics in Bahá'í scholarship. It would also seem fitting for obvious reasons for Bahá'í scholars to continue to attract attention to Bahá'u'lláh as "World Reformer" through more direct apologetic approaches. One should be wary, however, of supposing that apologetics is an inferior genre of Bahá'í study. It does not include, or should not include, dogmatism, emotionalism, empty rhetoric, and ideology, that is, the politics of an idea without the dynamics of faith. Apologetics, while grounded in faith, employs the methods of the scientific study of religion and can use to its benefit certain of the so-called "critical" methodologies found in western scholarship. Apology should be, in short, "responsible apologetics."

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

Great perceptive, prophetic figures and thinkers have appeared, yes, but scarcely any of the stature of a Sakyamuni, a Zarathustra, or a Confucius, any of the stature of a representative of the whole course of the age, any in a position to guide, "sublimate", cause to "precipitate" (in the chemical sense of the word), or at least to assist at the birth of, the "new mankind" still in

gestation....What is needed today is a force that, in the old, traditional schema, could be defined as "prophetic"---in order to search out, with the authority of the fully lived personal experience, a path to the altogether human assimilation and vanquishing of the new, dehumanizing positions imposed by contemporary civilization... (Silence 93)

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

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