

# The Silences of God: A Meditation

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The Silences

Resuman

El impacto de la Palabra de Dios ha

of God:

dominado la historia de la

religión

y nuestra definición de la madurez

A Meditation

en evolución de la humanidad.

Sin

embargo, en una edad en que el poder

de las palabras ha sido sistemáticamente

BAHIYYIH NAKHJAVANI

erosionado y la ortodoxia del

lenguaje ha

sido cuestionada, podría ser que nuestra

consciencia acerca del silencio de Dios sea

Abstract

esencial en moldear nuestras

selecciones

The impact of the Word of God has dom-

individuales y al definir

nuestras historias

inated the history of religion and our defi-

colectivas. Este ensayo explora

algunas

nition of the evolving maturation of hu-

de las maneras en que el

silencio Divino

mankind. But in an age in which the power

es inferido en los escritos de

Bahá'u'lláh

of words has been systematically eroded

y ofrece una meditación sobre

cómo el

and the orthodoxy of language has been

mismo juega un rol vital en

ayudarnos a

questioned, it may be that our awareness

entender Sus palabras.

of God's silence is essential in shaping our

individual choices and defining our collec-

"The silence of the unsaid,"

according

tive histories. This essay explores some of

to John Berger, "is always

working

the ways that Divine silence is inferred in

surreptitiously with another

silence,

the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and offers a

which is that of the

unsayable. What

meditation on how it plays a vital role in

is unsaid one time," he continues, "can

helping us understand His words.

be said on another occasion. But the

unsayable can never be said—unless

Resumé

L'influence du Verbe de Dieu a dominé  
 Argentinian  
 l'histoire de la religion et notre définition  
 believed  
 de l'évolution de l'humanité vers sa  
 "silence" at all  
 maturité. Mais, à une époque où le pouvoir  
 not actual-  
 des mots subit une érosion systématique  
 ly a prayer. And if speech  
 was to be  
 et où l'orthodoxie du langage est remise  
 "right" according to the poet  
 W. B.  
 en question, notre conscience du silence  
 Yeats, it might only be "after  
 long si-  
 de Dieu pourrait bien jouer un rôle  
 lence." That may be why Hamlet  
 died  
 déterminant dans l'orientation de nos  
 with the words, "The rest is  
 silence"  
 choix personnels et de notre expérience  
 on his lips, after four and a  
 half hours  
 collective. Dans le présent essai, l'auteur  
 of talk, in spite of which critics of the  
 explore certaines allusions au silence  
 play have been chattering about what  
 divin que nous trouvons dans les écrits de  
 he meant for the past five centuries.  
 Bahá'u'lláh et il propose une réflexion sur  
 la façon dont ce silence joue un rôle vital  
 1 Preface to Timothy  
 O'Grady, I Could  
 dans notre compréhension de Sa Parole.  
 Read the Sky.  
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And in keeping with the words of poets  
 the assumptions of our predecessors  
 and other tragic heroes, my brother  
 regarding these huge vacuities. And  
 in  
 the end, as Eliot says, "And what  
 er once told me that he wondered  
 there  
 is to conquer / . . . has already  
 when God might one day send us a  
 been  
 discovered / Once or twice, what  
 Manifestation of His Silence—"Just  
 there  
 is to conquer has already been  
 for a change," he added, "because we  
 discov-  
 never seem to listen to His words."  
 ered / Once or twice, or several  
 times,  
 But I am going to ignore all this good  
 by men whom one cannot hope / To  
 advice. Despite Bahá'u'lláh's warning  
 emulate" ("East Coker," v., ll.

11-14).2

that "[t]he essence of true safety is to observe silence [and] look at the end like of things" (Tablets 156), I shall take con- the risk of speaking about the impact constellations. of God's silences on us and of writing about how His words can, and perhaps must, ultimately render us mute. universe, God's silences have always pre-empted our words. Poets have can tried to fill them. Philosophers have time. sought to question them. Theologians traditional- of all cloths have attempted to define Holy their dazzling darknesses. The history on of religion itself, like the science of words cosmology, is as thick as the spangled fundamental night sky with the silences between reli- the stars. Sometimes these gaps have the been seen as challenges to our aware- They ness, creative challenges that enable us infallible to aspire to seek that wholeness we call to "truth." At other times, they have been interpreted as contradictions in the its world and in ourselves, incongruities lives. It that can never be resolved and that Revelation remind us of the endlessness of hu- broken, mility. We have all failed, by and large,

We have invariably misunderstood. But perhaps all our theologies, our ancient astrologies, have been structured on fictitious Perhaps our attempts to understand the wheeling mysteries of God have been built, like the Ptolemaic in ignorance of these subtle black holes in our understanding, which only be filled gradually, and over The study of religion has ly been based on meditations of Scripture. But perhaps a meditation the silences between these holy will bring us closer to the unity underlying our faiths. All gions are equally concerned with interpretation of Divine silence. all direct our attention to its mysteries and claim to hold the key its understanding. They all caution us, too, about impact, about its import on our is recorded, in The Book of that, after the seventh seal was God withdrew into His silence for

the  
 to gauge these breathless immensities. length of half an hour. It must  
 have  
 We have either repeated each other's been the most unbearable half hour  
 errors in different languages or have in all creation. A single moment  
 more  
 disagreed with them using different and the universe would have  
 imploded.  
 metaphors, or we have simply echoed 2 Quartet no. 2 of the Four  
 Quartets.  
 The Silences of God 51  
 Certainly it was sufficient to render are invalidated, our suppositions  
 swept  
 the angels mad. But there is much to aside, our institutions and  
 ideologies  
 be learned from that brief half hour. all undermined by the impact of  
 It is a reminder that, contrary to what He has told us. His  
 utterances,  
 received opinion, God is not actually moreover, are not only brief but  
 long  
 all that voluble. He does not, generally term in their effects—so vast  
 that they  
 speaking, waste words. His messages stretch beyond the grasp of human  
 are brief; His silences much longer minds; so dense and packed with  
 than His passages among us. In fact, meaning, so gnomic and enigmatic in  
 His reticence is as significant as His their import that it takes  
 millennia  
 Revelation—both contain secret to unpick the knots, break open  
 the  
 wisdoms, mysteries that require our seals, and understand them. He  
 comes  
 deepest meditation. among us intermittently, traces His  
 Indeed, if we compare the book Will briefly on our human shores, and  
 of Revelation with the book of leaves us measuring His tracks in  
 the  
 Creation, there appears at first glance sands for centuries.  
 to be considerably more surplus in "In My presence amongst you,"  
 the latter. Whether due to human writes Bahá'u'lláh, "there is a  
 wisdom,  
 obtuseness or some graver mystery, and in My absence there is yet  
 another,  
 God's words tend to double up, like inscrutable to all but God, the  
 Incom-  
 puns or reversible clothing, and seem parable, the All-Knowing"  
 (Kitáb-i-  
 to serve more than one purpose at a Aqdas ¶53, 39). A sigh from the

An-  
time. They reach beyond evolutionary      cient of Days can cause each atom  
to  
utilitarianism, like wonder, like beauty, acquire its own unique and separate  
or, as Nabokov noted, like a butterfly's character. A breath from His lips  
can  
wings. Perhaps this is another meaning      set the fires of hell ablaze and  
open  
of divine economy: the exquisite      paradise before men's eyes. Meaning  
is  
capacity of God's silences to resonate      blasted into a thousand pieces by  
one  
with the alternative meanings of His      syllable from Him, and words,  
stripped  
words.      naked by the stroke of His Pen, are  
When He does speak, His      sent scuttling into the world, like  
intervention in human affairs is not      monks shorn of their old habits. We  
only creative but destructive, too.      live and die as He breathes through  
We are revived by the breeze of His      our collective histories. For He is  
the  
presence: we are restored, resurrected,      Cleaver, the Ravager, the Inflictor  
of  
rendered vivid to our selves whenever      Trials. He is the supreme Love and  
the  
He passes by. But our lives are      Slayer of lovers, all in one.  
simultaneously reduced to rubble by  
the resonance of His comings, the  
echo left by His goings: our theories  
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THE DEATH OF WORDS      'Tis all in pieces, all coherence  
gone,  
End-of-the-world vocabulary strikes      All just supply, and all  
relation...."  
an ominously repetitive note in the      ("The Anatomy of the World,"  
human ear. We are fatally familiar      ll.205-14)<sup>3</sup>  
with it. We have heard it all before. But  
although we like to believe that each      At the start of the twentieth  
of these turning points in history is      century, Yeats, too, described a  
collapse  
hyperbolically unique and each end      of significance as well as of  
society; he  
absolute, no resurrection is entire, no      brooded over the demise not only  
of  
rebirth final. We seem to be afflicted, as      Ireland, but of all civilization:  
a species, by an inclination toward the  
supremacy fallacy, that fatal propensity      Things fall apart; the centre

to imagine ourselves chosen to be the  
 cannot hold;  
 first or doomed to be the last, to assume  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the  
 we are unique and believe ourselves to  
 world,  
 be the only. But beginnings and ends  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,  
 have always involved re-interpretation.  
 and everywhere  
 Turning points in human history have  
 The ceremony of innocence is  
 invariably coincided with inquiries  
 into language and a questioning of      drowned ....  
 words. Clichés have to die in order for      ("The Second Coming." ll.3-6)<sup>4</sup>  
 poems to be reborn.  
 And we do not even need God to      And one of the characteristic  
 tell us this, because poets have done      nightmares of our own times is to  
 find      ourselves standing on ground zero  
 so over and over again. John Donne      of  
 not only bore witness to the end of an      language itself. Not only have  
 culture      and tradition given way over the  
 epoch in the seventeenth century, but      course  
 to the breaking of a poetic tradition,      of two world wars and their  
 rumbling      consequences, but the very  
 the shattering of meter, the revolution      foundation  
 of rhyme:      of words has been eroded. Writers  
 in      the Western literary tradition have  
 the Western literary tradition have  
 And new philosophy calls all in      been pondering this collapse for the  
 doubt,      past two centuries. We cannot talk  
 The element of fire is quite put  
 out,      3 Norton Anthology of English  
 Literature  
 The sun is lost, and th'earth, and      (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), Vol.  
 B,  
 no man's wit      pp. 1293-94.  
 Can well direct him where to look      4 Norton Anthology of English  
 Literature  
 for it.      (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), Vol.  
 F,  
 ....      p. 2036.  
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mean our ends. And since our ends are rarely consummations "devoutly to be wished" but rather a consequence that does not always promise with 5 Set to music by Benjamin Britten, Op. 27. privately printed 1941, published One of the distinctions of this Dispensation may be that Bahá'u'lláh has York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1942. Quartets."

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invited us to think about the golden silences of God as well as the unsullied summoning silver of His Words. He has drawn our attention to their reciprocity. Perhaps there are as many lessons to be learned from the former as there is guidance implicit in the latter. It may even be that we can only understand the fundamentals of His Covenant in the relationship between the two. No one can speak and listen simultaneously. Words require silence to be heard. Even the least significant of speech, uttered at the most primary level of communication, depends on the assumption that someone is listening. And this is a fundamental law, of an absolute prerequisite for communication, which we ignore to our cost, and it is one of the crucial lessons we learn from silence in this Dispensation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms this principle in Paris Talks when He observes, "Bahá'u'lláh says there is a sign [from

power of silence. We may be missing the point by not listening.

## GOLD AND SILVER

6 The first of the "Four

the Sovereign, the Mighty, the All- Praised" (¶ 115, 61), He is

us to enter into that primary

Once the listening soul steps into

sacred space, attunes itself to the

membrance of God, and implores His forgiveness, we become receptive to understanding the Word of God, but only if we give it our undivided attention. And if we are to attend to

the meanings implicit in the Word of God, the purest silence is required.

But it is hard to hear the Voice

the Ancient of Days in the middle of the cacophony of daily life. We are surrounded by noise: the vapid

of political campaigns, the rumble

collapsing ideals, the grunts of

and howls of greed on every side.

If we catch His accents behind the uproar, we are lucky. Shoghi Effendi vividly describes this challenge

the metaphor of light and darkness:

"Amidst the shadows which are

God] in every phenomenon: the sign of the intellect is contemplation and the sign of contemplation is silence, because it is impossible for a man to do two things at one time—he cannot

history" both speak and meditate" (174).

Silence is therefore essential for understanding. When Bahá'u'lláh the

writes in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, "Blessed silenc-

is he who, at the hour of dawn, cen- an-

tring his thoughts on God, occupied were

with His remembrance, and suppli- God's

cating His forgiveness, directeth his the

steps to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and, would

entering therein, seateth himself in and

silence to listen to the verses of God, The Silences of God

Mysteriously, slowly, and resistlessly God accomplishes His silences.

design, though the sight that an

meets our eyes in this day be the Revelation;

spectacle of a world hopelessly entangled in its own meshes, ut- words.

terly careless of the Voice which, for a century, has been calling it to God, and miserably subservi- necessity

ent to the siren voices which are attempting to lure it into the vast abyss. (Promised Day 116)

conceived institutions, He has freed us to We would never have reached the last of these subsidiary clauses had we not

increasingly gathering about us," he writes, "we can faintly discern the glimmerings of Bahá'u'lláh's unearthly sovereignty appearing fitfully on the horizon of

(World Order 168).

And the counterpoint between what we see and what we hear, between

shrillness of our age and God's

es, is depicted by the Guardian in

other remarkable sentence. Here,

it not for the basso ostinato of

Will that keeps the syntax steady,

hiss and spit of our own noise

literally wind around our throats

strangle us:

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we listen. Democracy resides in our right to think, to ponder the

Bahá'u'lláh has liberated us to

equality of hearing in this

He has invited us into a democracy of listening, of meditating on His

Each one of us has this God-given right, this freedom. In fact, He has granted it as an obligation, a

for our spiritual independence. While abrogating individual authority and placing power in His divinely con-

ponder His meanings, to plunge into the ocean of His Revelation without

kept hold of the main sentence that quietly reminds us that God does and always will accomplish His design.

literally

Silence, in such circumstances as we live, is synonymous with spiritual life. this

Small wonder, therefore, that in this in

Dispensation Bahá'u'lláh has annulled the

the role of the chattering theologian, fact

invalidated the authority of the priest. that he has drowned.

Our response to God's silence cannot be passive, but neither can it be foisted on others. The principle of autocracy in the Bahá'í Faith lies in the authen- EARS TO HEAR

inclined to But we are not, by nature,

icated texts of this religion, in the drown. We cling to the dry land of absolute authority of the words writ- received ideas, the sand and

pebbles

ten by its Founder and His appointed of inherited notions. We turn our Interpreters. No individual can usurp backs on the ocean and become adept that autocracy; no one has to right to at cultivating spiritual deafness,

impose his or her personal interpreta- especially when it is too much of a tions of those words over others'. But challenge to hear the uncomfortable truth. As a result, there is

the principle of democracy also exists, another kind

not only in how we vote, nor just in of silence buried between the words how we consult, or are governed by of God, which is caused not only by elected institutions rather than ap- our inability but by our

unwillingness

pointed individuals, but also in the way to listen.

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There are times, Bahá'u'lláh ex- a proof of truth as the words when plains, when God chooses to be silent they are uttered. He reminds us of the

because of "the impediments that have wisdom of this withholding silence by

hindered Thy people from recognizing highlighting the relationship of words

Thy truth" (Gleanings 28). He with- to time as well as to

circumstance:

holds His Words when He knows we "Not everything that a man knoweth are not listening to them; He speaks can be disclosed, nor can

everything

only if we are ready to hear, for "words that he can disclose be regarded as  
are revealed according to the capacity timely, nor can every timely  
utterance of the people." And, as He tells us, be considered as suited to the  
capacity of those who hear it" (Gleanings  
with beguiling candour, "as there were 176).  
few ears to hear, for some time the Pen Once we understand this wisdom,  
our hearts might be more willing to  
has been silent in its own chamber, and absorb  
to such a degree that silence has had the import of His Words. But until  
we do so, we are effectively deaf.  
precedence over utterance" (Bahá'í  
And our  
Scriptures 133). deafness delays the inevitable.  
In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh "How manifold are the truths,"  
He tells us, "which must remain  
goes even further and establishes this unuttered  
reciprocity between the ear and the until the appointed time is come!"  
tongue as a spiritual principle. The (Gleanings 176). And even when the  
method of the Manifestations, in oth- right time comes, how often do  
truths remain unuttered because we are  
er words, is one which we should emu- still  
late: "The wise are they that speak not not listening?  
unless they obtain a hearing, even as  
the cup-bearer, who proffereth not his SUFFERING IN SILENCE  
cup till he findeth a seeker, and the lov- Once we do begin to listen,  
er who crieth not out from the depths  
however, we hear new layers in all that God  
of his heart until he gazeth upon the  
does  
beauty of his beloved" (Hidden Words, not say. His silence, we discover  
to our  
Persian n.36). Such words not only shame, can be filled with sadness,  
with  
disappointment on our account, which  
caution us to weigh what we say but  
is that terrible alternative to His good  
invite us to meditate on the reasons for  
pleasure.  
and causes of silence. "O Bond Slave of the World!"  
God's silences cannot, by their very writes Bahá'u'lláh in the Hidden

Words,

nature, be fathomed, but the withholding ones caused by our unreadiness to and

listen, our inability to hear, are worth heedless-

pondering. To be responsive to the thy

receptivity of the listener, Bahá'u'lláh came"

seems to suggest, can be as eloquent  
The Silences of God

The sorrow of the Best Beloved and the Friend is more dreadful, perhaps, space,

than the wrath of the Father. Divine displeasure is more difficult for us to plangent

bear than any punishment, because it how

resonates with the silence of God's forbearance, it echoes with His long suffering:

whipped until we cried for mercy. As

At many a dawn have I turned from the realms of the Placeless we

unto thine abode, and found thee on the bed of ease busied with others than Myself. Thereupon,

even as the flash of the spirit, I returned to the realms of celestial glory and breathed it not in

My retreats above unto the hosts of holiness. (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden response.

Words, Persian n.28)

our

follies reverberating a hundredfold; it

It is that "breathed it not" which really confounds us. It is that delicacy of His keeping silent on our account,

of His "desiring not" our shame. He would not advertise our faithlessness nor have our stupidity trumpeted be-

omi-

"Many a dawn hath the breeze of My loving-kindness wafted over thee

found thee upon the bed of

ness fast asleep. Bewailing then

plight it returned whence it

(Persian n.30).

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gone as far as assuming that God's silence, like the darkness of outer

is synonymous with a vacuum. If and when we finally realize how

it is with sorrow on our behalf,

quiet with patient forgiveness, we

may be even more ashamed than if we

had been hauled up by the heels and

our understanding of this new Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh evolves,

begin to become unnervingly aware of a very dangerous, very mature kind of silence that lies between His Words.

NO ANSWER CAME THE STERN REPLY

A corollary to the silence of God's sorrow is the silence of His

It is against that gong that we hear

is in that quiet echo that we register

the hollowness of our own sounds.

God's way of answering our urgent questions with silence is the most painful kind of all.

We are all familiar with that

fore the angels. "And whenever the  
insis-  
manifestation of My holiness sought  
beseechings.

His own abode," He reminds us, "a  
stranger found He there, and, home-  
the

less, hastened unto the sanctuary of  
We

the Beloved. Notwithstanding I have  
crite-

concealed thy secret and desired not  
reality,

thy shame" (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words,  
outraged

Persian n.27).

indignant

This sin-covering silence of God  
has emboldened us, and made us bra-  
frustrated

zen. It has permitted us to persist in  
our follies to such a degree that we have  
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implacable silence of God's response  
has provoked us to cynicism as well as  
silence is

to despair.

by

Indeed, most of twentieth-century  
literature has been an exploration the  
our

pointlessness of asking questions, in  
inadequacy as well as compulsion in  
doeth,

our use of words. The characters of  
last

Vladimir and Estragon talk incessant-  
frustration is

ly as they wait for the reply of Godot,  
carrieth

which never fully satisfies even when it  
comes<sup>7</sup>; the Marabar caves in Forster's  
A Passage to India render all words  
equally meaningless, even as their  
sometimes a

echoes can be interpreted in a myriad

nous silence that counters our

tent prayers, our anxious

We are well acquainted with those  
waves of silence that lap against

dry shores of our shrill demands.

expect a response that suits our

ria of logic, our perception of

our immediate needs, and are

by its absence. We hurl our

requests against the concave sky-blue

shell of His ear and become

at the mocking echoes that redound

upon us. What we perceive to be the

which is in truth praiseworthy"

(Selections 48). Why such a

"praiseworthy" is best explained

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who, with an ineffable  
lightness of touch, reminds us of

total dependence on that Will when

He affirms that "He doeth as He

and what recourse have we?" In the

analysis all our fury and

a waste of breath because "He

out His Will, He ordaineth what He  
pleaseth" (Selections 51).

The seeming non-response of God  
to our appeals is therefore

clear answer, had we the ears to

hear it  
different ways; Joyce has taken inco-  
'Ab-  
herence to such heights of creativity  
"Then  
in Finnegans Wake that language has  
head  
become a mockery of itself in the ab-  
in the  
sence of any other meaningful game  
51). For  
to play. The vacancy underlying words  
beneath  
has become a way for contemporary  
realize  
artists to bear witness to our stoicism,  
and also to our folly as human beings.  
the  
It sums up the existential as well as  
mea-  
aesthetic dilemma of contemporary  
dis-  
existence. But interestingly enough,  
harm  
in the Bahá'í Writings we not only ex-  
folly of  
plore the futility of asking questions  
case,  
but find confirming answers implicit  
They  
in this silence.

are the equivalent of pure  
compassion.  
According to the Báb, these silences  
are themselves ordained by God and,  
as such, are an expression of His Will.  
He states, "O Ye servants of God!  
of  
Verily, be not grieved if a thing ye  
analysis,  
asked of Him remaineth unanswered,  
the  
inasmuch as He hath been commanded  
and we  
by God to observe silence, a silence  
silenc-  
es of God, another wind stirs in the  
7 See Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.

and the hearts to understand. As  
du'l-Bahá continues to assert,  
better for thee to bow down thy  
in submission, and put thy trust  
All-Merciful Lord" (Selections  
if we listened to the resonance  
this kind of silence we might  
that the demands we have been mak-  
ing, the requirements we have set,  
logic by which means we seek to  
sure God's response can only reap  
appointment at best, or bring us  
at worse. They echo with the  
our demands. His silences, in this  
are a mercy to our own selves.

#### AT A LOSS FOR WORDS

Ironically enough, the knowledge  
such silences can, in the last  
strike us dumb. When the ear of  
spirit inclines in their direction  
begin to hear all that is in these

soul, another note strikes the bone. "It behooveth you to remain silent before dis-

His Throne," observes the Báb, "for indeed of all the things which have been created between heaven and earth recreate nothing on that Day will be deemed oth-

more fitting than the observance of silence" (Selections 164).  
dejected

For the silences as well as the words of God have a curious impact on the pas-

uproar in our heads. They can leave long us at a loss for words. They can render us mute. When we listen to them, (Tablets,

we hear something beyond the actual sounds and syllables. When we stop the true

our ears to our own noises, some un-acquired

spoken understanding is communicat- idle

ed to us that rises out of our darkness urges

like a murmuring remembrance. As Bahá'u'lláh states in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, their

spirit, for when "the mention of God When the stream of utterance reached this stage, We beheld, (Kitáb-i-Íqán

and lo! the sweet savours of God were being wafted from the day-arteries

spring of Revelation. . . . It made all things new, and brought un-numbered and inestimable gifts to

from the unknowable Friend. The robe of human praise can never

contain are muted, we find our defini- tions dissolving, our languages

integrating. All words tend toward self-destruction, but God destroys words absolutely in order to

them. His silence, too, absorbs all

er sounds into itself and turns them into music: "Be ye not sad nor

on account of the disturbance and up- roar of the people of desire and

sion," writes 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "Ere the symphony of the Kingdom shall silence all the other noises"

vol. 1, 223).

Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh urges

seeker to free himself from all

meanings, to purge his heart of all

fancies and false assumptions. He

us to strip away the shadow of words that cloud our understanding of

hath become an empty name" and "His holy Word a dead letter"

29), it is necessary to breathe a new creativity into it through the

of language.

When the connotations of words thicken with use and abuse, we react

their "shadows" merely and lose sight of their "spirits" altogether, as the

Báb

hope to match Its noble stature,  
and Its shining figure the mantle  
of utterance can never fit. With-  
out word It unfoldeth the inner  
mysteries, and without speech It  
revealeth the secrets of the divine  
sayings. (59)

shall not pronounce judgment

Once our human noises are mo-  
mentarily hushed, once the voices we  
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very shadow of His verse in their  
heart, and rendering naught, and  
at once, all their inmost realities  
(Gleanings

and deeds, without even perceiv-  
ing it. (Persian Bayán 6:8; qtd. in  
repeatedly,

Saiedi, Gate of the Heart 37)

The act of pondering, of meditating,

And therefore must each new revela-  
tion cast aside the definitions of the  
one.

old, like outworn robes. We must strip  
of

ourselves to seek for truth, not only  
humbled and in silence, but quite na-  
ked: "O brother," Bahá'u'lláh writes in  
the Kitáb-i-Íqán,

In this

state of inward and outward listening

behold how the inner mysteries  
of "rebirth," of "return," and of  
"resurrection" have each, through  
eternal.

these all-sufficing, these unan-  
swerable, and conclusive utteranc-  
man

es, been unveiled and unravelled  
before thine eyes. God grant that  
through His gracious and invis-  
ible assistance, thou mayest divest  
thy body and soul of the old gar-  
stat-

ment, and array thyself with the

infers:

The reason for this command is  
that haply, in the Day of the Reve-  
lation of that supreme Truth, the  
feet of the people shall not falter

upon the bridge, and that they

against the Fashioner of their ex-

istence, adducing against Him the

## THE TOUCHSTONE

"Ponder this in thine heart"

46, 76; and Kitáb-i-Íqán 125, 149,  
167), writes Bahá'u'lláh

and "meditate" on the Word of God.

The act of pondering, of meditating,

And therefore must each new revela-  
tion cast aside the definitions of the  
one. has traditionally been depicted as a  
thoughtful one, an inward-turning

old, like outworn robes. We must strip  
of It has implied a certain conjunction

ourselves to seek for truth, not only  
humbled and in silence, but quite na-  
ked: "O brother," Bahá'u'lláh writes in  
the Kitáb-i-Íqán, body and mind that indicates poise,  
that implies a quiet control and a  
steadiness of concentration which  
is both physical and spiritual.

In this

state of inward and outward listening

behold how the inner mysteries  
of "rebirth," of "return," and of  
"resurrection" have each, through  
eternal.

these all-sufficing, these unan-  
swerable, and conclusive utteranc-  
man

es, been unveiled and unravelled  
before thine eyes. God grant that  
through His gracious and invis-  
ible assistance, thou mayest divest  
thy body and soul of the old gar-  
stat-

ment, and array thyself with the

we reach for the touchstone of  
understanding. Sometimes, by grace,  
we attain it. And the thrill is

The well-known icon of the West-  
ern meditative tradition, that of a

contemplating a death's head, contains  
its own inherent thrill. The mirroring  
of skulls, the eyeing of the hollow  
eyed has always hinted at the possible  
reversal of the roles. If Rodin's

ue The Thinker and Mona Lisa's smile

new and imperishable attire. (158) still hold their power over us, it is pre-  
 sumably because of this. When the In the final analysis, this "new" nakedness is the only attire that is relatively imperishable on this side of the grave. Like silence, such a divestment of old garments is actually what renders us immortal. We may have imagined that writing words would eternalize us, but ironically enough, it is unadorned by words that we might tell live forever.

observer becomes aware of being observed, a shudder passes through him. A perturbation seizes his mind. He is filled with dread that perhaps he is one who is actually being read. That awareness is a step in the direction of true understanding. Religion, like art, points heightened self-awareness. By us to "ponder" and to "meditate" on

the Word of God, Bahá'u'lláh is giving us the key to a new and hidden language. The Silences of God

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For it seems that when God splits the stone tablets of His silence, His Word actually gives utterance to us. (254) standard, this is the Touchstone of God, wherewith He proveth His servants. (Kitáb-i-Íqán

It reverses our position as speakers, as wordmongers, and forces upon us the uneasy recognition that we ourselves have been breathed forth, that we are the ones being interpreted, even as we speak. "Yea," Bahá'u'lláh confirms, in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, "such things as throw consternation into the hearts of all men come to pass only that each soul may be tested by the touchstone is." In a letter<sup>8</sup> to the Universal House of Justice, the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Center recent scholars . . . assert that, the Qur'án itself, the form of most prevalent is irony." This it defines as "the perception of a clash between appearance and reality, tween the ideal and what actually

of God, that the true may be known  
 divine  
 and distinguished from the false" (52).  
 Whenever multiple meanings are at  
 work, language permits and delights  
 in irony. And whenever words contain  
 irony, they retain elasticity, they resist  
 literalism and obfuscation. When lan-  
 guage invites us to play games with  
 recognize  
 perspective and scale, with appearance  
 as  
 and reality, it keeps our minds and  
 layers  
 spirits alive, it jolts us out of our old  
 signifi-  
 habits. And the myriad silences con-  
 their  
 tained between the words of God are  
 perhaps the most creative use of irony  
 and  
 in the world, for they force us to ques-  
 assayer of  
 tion all our assumptions, all our habits.  
 Bahá'u'lláh affirms that,  
 very  
 truth to us, the Manifestations of  
 the Birds of Heaven and Doves  
 of Eternity speak a twofold lan-  
 guage. One language, the outward  
 language, is devoid of allusions,  
 Thou,  
 is unconcealed and unveiled. . . .  
 The other language is veiled and  
 concealed, so that whatever lieth  
 hidden in the heart . . . may be  
 'Humorist'  
 made manifest. This is the divine  
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grace to manifest Thy Cause," attests  
 Bahá'u'lláh in one of His prayers.  
 within  
 "Wherefore I have been subjected to  
 break  
 such adversities that my tongue hath  
 Although

Only when we respond to this  
 irony—only when we are conscious  
 of what is concealed and what is re-  
 vealed—do we begin to grasp the  
 fundamental purpose of the Word of  
 God. As long as we cannot hear the  
 silences between His words and the  
 ironies in both, we will not  
 their echoes in ourselves. As long  
 as  
 we cannot see these multiple  
 and simultaneous scales of  
 cance, we will be deprived of  
 creative power. This Word and Its  
 silent shadow, sifts and fashions  
 shapes us—It is the divine  
 our souls.  
 Indeed, in order to prove this  
 the Word of God submit themselves  
 to the most grievous ordeals and al-  
 low themselves to be harrowed by  
 the greatest tests of all. "It is  
 O my God, Who hast called me into  
 being through the power of Thy  
 might, and hast endued me with Thy  
 8 Memorandum titled "The  
 12 Jan. 1997.  
 face, and Gabriel overshadowed me,  
 and the Spirit of Glory stirred  
 my bosom, bidding me arise and  
 my silence" (Gleanings 103).

been hindered from extolling Thee and from magnifying Thy glory" (Prayers and Meditations 208).

He to

What must it mean for these ex-

His

traordinary Beings Who know better each

than anyone the impossibility of com-

its prehending God's Word, to have to be "Glo-

the Ones Who utter it?

tongue, both the tongue of my body

The domain of His decree is too vast for the tongue of mortals

to describe, or for the bird of the human mind to traverse; and the dispensations of His providence are too mysterious for the mind

of man to comprehend. His creation no end hath overtaken, and it . . . will continue to the "End that God's

knoweth no end." Ponder this utterance in thine heart, and reflect how it is applicable unto all these holy Souls. (Kitáb-i-Íqán 167)

be more perturbing than this duality?

When Bahá'u'lláh writes of the Word of God summoning Him to Kitáb-i-Íqán,

speech, the darkness from which It rises not only perturbs His rational mind to

but seizes upon Him, like an involuntary Will. "Had it been in my power," every

He writes, "I would have, under no circumstances, consented to distinguish

be myself amongst men." But when He

acknowledg-

chooses to hold His peace, "lo, the voice of the Holy Ghost, standing on my right hand, aroused me, and the

He calls on God "with a stammering tongue" and with an "afflicted pen" (Prayers and Meditations 8), were

keep silent, He says, every hair on

head would vibrate with its music,

bone of His body would flute with

song, His very blood would sing:

rified art Thou, O Lord my God! My

and the tongue of my heart, my limbs and members, every pulsating vein

within me, every hair of my head, all proclaim that Thou art God, and that there is none other God beside Thee" (Prayers and Meditations 112).

Those Who are the Embodiments of His Names and Attributes not only endure the paradoxes implicit in

mysterious Will, but contain them.

The mysterious mingling of Their divine and human nature symbolizes the ultimate irony of God. What could

When people "discover suddenly," as Bahá'u'lláh says in the

"that a Man, Who hath been living in their midst, Who, with respect

every human limitation, hath been their equal, had risen to abolish

established principle imposed by

Faith—they would of a certainty

veiled and hindered from

ing His truth" (74).

No wonder the Manifestations of God in every age pose the ultimate

Supreme Spirit appeared before my  
God

The Silences of God

caused not this turmoil but to test and  
prove His servants" (Kitáb-i-Íqán 51).

...

We are perturbed by the nature of  
these living symbols and metaphors.  
We can barely understand heaven and  
earth, but "whatever lieth between  
them," namely the Manifestations  
themselves, remains the ultimate  
enigma. These divine Embodiments  
speak only in veiled language about  
their dual nature. In the last analysis  
the Word of God offers no rational  
Manifestation." (Vol. IV, 93;  
explanation to Their mystery, and  
provisional trans.)

we are left to respond in the silences,  
"inasmuch as the divine Purpose hath  
Clearly the significance of words  
decreed that the true should be known  
has been so democratized in this age  
from the false, and the sun from the  
shadow, He hath, therefore, in every  
season sent down upon mankind the  
an

showers of tests from His realm of  
glory" (Kitáb-i-Íqán 53).

rather

And so, the final purpose of  
God's silences is to test us. It is  
that

the touchstone whose ambiguities  
destroy and undermine our facile  
interpretations. It is a double-edged  
sword that has been tempered, like  
steel, in the fires of paradox. And  
revelation

the fact that these divine paradoxes,  
in turn, test our understanding may  
be implicit in Bahá'u'lláh words, in  
the Ma'idíy-i-Asmani, in which He  
things,"

anticipates a different "proof " in the

test for the human race: "Verily,

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We therefore . . . made Our verses  
testimonies for all to witness.

However, in this Dispensation, the  
one True God—Glorified be His  
Name—hath purposed that most  
of the believers who are wholly  
devoted to Him should speak in  
the language of divine verses.

Therefore, we have ordained that  
a proof other than the revelation  
of divine verses be produced to  
vindicate the truth of the next

that new proofs must be found to com-  
municate the Primal Will to human-  
kind. I do not know whether this is

indication that we will one day probe  
the silences of God in prose

than verse, or whether my brother was  
prophetic, after all, in suggesting

in some future dispensation, a female  
Manifestation of God might appear,  
simply smile, and say nothing at all.

But certainly we shall be tested by  
whatever is "other than the

of divine verses."

And with that thought, I will  
for my own safety's sake, "observe  
silence," "look at the end of

and "renounce the world"

(Bahá'u'lláh,  
next Dispensation than what we have      Tablets 156).  
been led to expect from those of the  
past. "As My previous Manifestation  
decreed that the proof of My  
Dispensation should be the revelation  
of divine verses," He states,  
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