

# The Mission of the Báb

Retrospective 1844-1994

BY DOUGLAS MARTIN

*In this article, first published in the 1994–5 edition of *The Bahá'í World*, Douglas Martin considers the Revelation of the Báb in the context of its impact on the Western writers of the period and its subsequent influence.*

The year 1994 marked the 150th anniversary of the declaration of His mission by the Báb (Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad, 1819–1850), one of the two Founders of the Bahá’í Faith. The moment invites an attempt to gain an overview of the extraordinary historical consequences that have flowed from an event little noticed at the time outside the confines of the remote and decadent society within which it occurred.

The first half of the 19th century was a period of messianic expectation in the Islamic world, as was the case in many parts of Christendom. In Persia a wave of millennialist enthusiasm had swept many in the religiously educated class of *Shí’ih* Muslim society, focused on belief that the fulfillment of prophecies in the Qur’án and the Islamic traditions was at hand. It was to one such ardent seeker<sup>1</sup> that, on the night of 22–23 May 1844, the Báb (a title meaning “Gate”) announced that He was the Bearer of a Divine Revelation destined not only to transform Islam but to set a new direction for the spiritual life of humankind.

During the decade that followed, mounting opposition from both clergy and state brought about the martyrdom of the Báb, the massacre of His leading disciples and of several thousands of His followers, and the virtual extinction of the religious system that He had founded. Out of these harrowing years, however, emerged a successor movement, the Bahá’í Faith, that has since spread throughout the planet and established its claim to represent a new and independent world religion.

It is to Bahá’u’lláh (Mírzá Husayn-‘Alí, 1817–1892), that the worldwide Bahá’í community looks as the source of its spiritual and social teachings, the authority for the laws and institutions that shape its life, and the vision of unity that has today made it one of the most geographically widespread and ethnically diverse of organized bodies of people on the planet. It is from Bahá’u’lláh that the Faith derives its name and toward Whose resting place in the Holy Land that the millions of Bahá’ís around the world daily direct their thoughts when they turn to God in prayer.

These circumstances in no way diminish, however, the fact that the new Faith was born amid the bloody and terrible magnificence surrounding the Báb’s brief mission, nor that the inspiration for its worldwide spread has been the spirit of self-sacrifice that Bahá’ís find in His life and the lives of the heroic band that followed Him. Prayers revealed by the Báb and passages from His voluminous writings are part of the

devotional life of Bahá'ís everywhere. The events of His mission are commemorated as annual holy days in tens of thousands of local Bahá'í communities.<sup>2</sup> On the slopes of Mount Carmel, the golden-domed Shrine where His mortal remains are buried dominates the great complex of monumental buildings and gardens constituting the administrative center of the Faith's international activities.

In contemporary public awareness of the Bahá'í community and its activities, however, the life and person of Bahá'u'lláh have largely overshadowed those of the Báb. In a sense, it is natural that this should be the case, given the primary role of Bahá'u'lláh as the fulfillment of the Báb's promises and the Architect of the Faith's achievements. To some extent, however, this circumstance also reflects the painfully slow emergence of the new religion from obscurity onto the stage of history. In a perceptive comment on the subject, the British historian Arnold Toynbee compared the level of appreciation of the Bahá'í Faith in most Western lands with the similarly limited impression that the mission of Jesus Christ had succeeded in making on the educated class in the Roman Empire some 300 years after His death.<sup>3</sup> Since most of the public activity of the Bahá'í community over the past several decades has focused on the demanding task of presenting Bahá'u'lláh's message, and elaborating the implications of its social teachings for the life of society, the Faith's 19th-century Persian origins have tended to become temporarily eclipsed in the public mind.

Indeed, Bahá'ís, too, are challenged by the implications of the extraordinary idea that our age has witnessed the appearance of two almost contemporaneous Messengers of God. Bahá'u'lláh describes the phenomenon as one of the distinguishing characteristics of the new religion and as a mystery central to the plan of God for the unification of humankind and the establishment of a global civilization.<sup>4</sup>

Fundamental to the Bahá'í conception of the evolution of civilization is an analogy to be found in the writings of both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. It draws a parallel between the process by which the human race has gradually been civilized and that whereby each one of its individual members passes through the successive stages of infancy, childhood, and adolescence to adulthood. The idea throws a measure of light on the relationship which Bahá'ís see between the missions of the two Founders of their religion.

Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh—the former implicitly and the latter explicitly—describe the human race as standing now on the brink of its collective maturity. Apart from the Báb's role as a Messenger of God, His advent marks the fruition of the process of the refining of human nature which thousands of years of Divine revelation have cultivated. It can be viewed, in that sense, as the gateway through which humankind must pass as it takes up the responsibilities of maturity. Its brevity itself seems symbolic of the relative suddenness of the transition.<sup>5</sup>

At the individual level, no sooner does one cross the critical threshold of maturity in his or her development than the challenges and opportunities of adulthood beckon. The emerging potentialities of human life must now find expression through the long years of responsibility and achievement: they must become actualized through marriage, a profession and family, and service to society. In the collective life of humanity, it is the mission of Bahá'u'lláh, the universal Messenger of God anticipated in the scriptures of all the world's religions.

ven as late as the end of the 19th century, however, it was the Báb who figured as the central Personality of the new religion among most of those Westerners who had become aware of its existence. Writing in the American periodical *Forum* in 1925, the French literary critic Jules Bois remembered the extraordinary impact which the story of the Báb continued to have on educated opinion in Europe as the 19th century closed:

All Europe was stirred to pity and indignation ... . Among the *littérateurs* of my generation, in the Paris of 1890, the martyrdom of the Báb was still as fresh a topic as had been the first news of His death in 1850. We wrote poems about Him. Sarah Bernhardt entreated Catulle Mendès for a play on the theme of this historic tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

Writers as diverse as Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, Edward Granville Browne, Ernest Renan, Aleksandr Tumanskiy, A.L.M. Nicolas, Viktor Rosen, Clément Huart, George Curzon, Matthew Arnold, and Leo Tolstoy were affected by the spiritual drama that had unfolded in Persia during the middle years of the 19th century. Not until the early part of our own century did the name the “Bahá’í Cause,” which the new religion had already adopted for itself as early as the 1860s, replace the designation of “Bábí movement” in general usage in the West.<sup>7</sup>

That this should have been the case was no doubt a reflection of the degree to which the brief but incandescent life of the Báb seemed to catch up and embody cultural ideals that had dominated European thought during the first half of the 19th century, and which exercised a powerful influence on the Western imagination for many decades thereafter. The concept commonly used to describe the course of Europe’s cultural and intellectual development during the first five or six decades of the 19th century is Romanticism. By the century’s beginning, European thought had begun to look beyond its preoccupation with the arid rationalism and mechanistic certainties of the Enlightenment toward an exploration of other dimensions of existence: the aesthetic, the emotional, the intuitive, the mystical, the “natural,” the “irrational.” Literature, philosophy, history, music, and art all responded strongly and gradually exerted a sympathetic influence on the popular mind.

In England, where the tendency was already gathering force as the century opened, one effect was to produce perhaps the most spectacular outpouring of lyrical poetry that the language has ever known. Over the next two to three decades these early insights were to find powerful echoes throughout Western Europe. A new order of things, a whole new world, lay within reach, if man would only dare what was needed. Liberated by the intellectual upheaval of the preceding decades, poets, artists and musicians conceived of themselves as the voice of immense creative capacities latent in human consciousness and seeking expression; as “prophets” shaping a new conception of human nature and human society. With the validity of traditional religion now shrouded in doubt, mythical figures and events from the classical past were summoned up to serve as vehicles for this heroic Ideal:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;  
To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;  
To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;  
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates ...  
This alone is Life, Joy, Empire and Victory.<sup>8</sup>

The same longings had awakened in America in the decades immediately preceding the Civil War and were to leave an indelible imprint on public consciousness. All of the transcendentalists became deeply attracted by the mystical literature of the Orient: the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayana, and the Upanishads, as well as the works of the major Islamic poets, Rúmi, Háfiz, and Sa'dí. The effect can be appreciated in such influential writings of Emerson as the Divinity School Address:

I look for the hour when that supreme Beauty which ravished the souls of those eastern Men, and chiefly those of the Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also ... I look for the new Teacher that shall follow so far those shining laws that He shall see them come full circle; ... shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show ... that Duty is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy.<sup>9</sup>

As the century advanced, the early Romantic optimism found itself increasingly mired in the successive disappointments and defeats of the revolutionary fervor it had helped arouse. Under the pressure of scientific and technological change, the culture of philosophical materialism to which enlightenment speculation had originally given rise gradually consolidated itself. The wars and revolutionary upheavals of the middle years of the century contributed further to a mood of "realism," a recognition that great ideals must somehow be reconciled with the obdurate circumstances of human nature.

Even in the relatively sober atmosphere of Victorian public discourse, however, Romantic yearnings retained a potent influence in Western consciousness. They produced a susceptibility to spiritual impulses which, while different from that which had characterized the opening decades of the century, now affected a broad public. If the revolutionary figure of Prometheus no longer spoke to English perceptions of the age, the Arthurian legend caught up the popular hope, blending youthful idealism with the insights of maturity, and capturing the imagination of millions precisely on that account:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfils himself in many ways,  
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.<sup>10</sup>

It is hardly surprising that, on minds formed in this cultural milieu, the figure of the Báb should exert a compelling fascination, as Westerners became acquainted with His story in the latter years of the century. Particularly appealing was the purity of His life, an unshadowed nobility of character that had won the hearts of many among His fellow countrymen who had come as doubters or even enemies and stayed to lay down their lives in His cause. Words which the Báb addressed to the first group of His

disciples suggest the nature of the moral standards He held up as goals for those who responded to His call:

Purge your hearts of worldly desires, and let angelic virtues be your adorning. ... The days when idle worship was deemed sufficient are ended. The time is come when naught but the purest motive, supported by deeds of stainless purity, can ascend to the throne of the Most High and be acceptable unto Him. ... Beseech the Lord your God to grant that no earthly entanglements, no worldly affections, no ephemeral pursuits, may tarnish the purity, or embitter the sweetness, of that grace which flows through you.<sup>11</sup>

Purity of heart was coupled with a courage and willingness for self-sacrifice that Western observers found deeply inspiring. The commentaries of Ernest Renan and others drew the inescapable parallel with the life of Jesus Christ. As the extraordinary drama of His final moments convincingly demonstrated,<sup>12</sup> the Báb could have at any moment saved Himself and achieved mastery over those who persecuted Him by taking advantage of the folly of His adversaries and the superstition of the general populace. He scorned to do so, and accepted death at the hands of His enemies only when satisfied that His mission had been completed in its entirety and in conformity with the Will of God. His followers, who had divested themselves of all earthly attachments and advantages, were barbarously massacred by adversaries who had sworn on the Qur'án to spare their lives and their honor, and who shamefully abused their wives and children after their deaths. Renan writes:

Des milliers de martyrs sont accourus pour lui avec l'allégresse au devant de la mort. Un jour sans pareil peut-être dans l'histoire du monde fut celui de la grande boucherie qui se fit des Bábís, à Téhéran. "On vit ce jour-là dans les rues et les bazars de Téhéran," dit un narrateur qui a tout su d'original, "un spectacle que la population semble devoir n'oublier jamais. ... Enfants et femmes s'avançaient en chantant un verset qui dit: En vérité nous venons de Dieu et nous retournons à Lui."<sup>13</sup>

Purity of heart and moral courage were matched by an idealism with which most Western observers could also readily identify. By the 19th century, the Persia to which the Báb addressed Himself and which had once been one of the world's great civilizations, had sunk to an object of despair and contempt among foreign visitors. A population ignorant, apathetic, and superstitious in the extreme was the prey of a profoundly corrupt Muslim clergy and the brutal regime of the Qájár shahs. Shí'ih Islam had, for the most part, degenerated into a mass of superstitions and mindless legalisms. Security of life and property depended entirely on the whims of those in authority.

Such was the society that the Báb summoned to reflection and self-discipline. A new age had dawned; God demanded purity of heart rather than religious formulae, an inner condition that must be matched by cleanliness in all aspects of daily life; truth was a goal to be won not by blind imitation but by personal effort, prayer, meditation, and detachment from the appetites. The nature of the accounts which Western writers like Gobineau, Browne, and Nicolas were later to hear from surviving followers of the Báb can be appreciated from the words in which Mullá Husayn-i-Bushrú'í described the effect on him of his first meeting with the Báb:

I felt possessed of such courage and power that were the world, all its peoples and its potentates, to rise against me, I would, alone and undaunted, withstand their onslaught. The universe seemed but a handful of dust in my grasp. I seemed to be the Voice of Gabriel personified, calling unto all mankind: "Awake, for, lo! the morning Light has broken."<sup>14</sup>

European observers, visiting the country long after the Báb's martyrdom, were struck by the moral distinction achieved by Persia's Bahá'í community. Explaining to Western readers the success of Bahá'í teaching activities among the Persian population, in contrast to the ineffectual efforts of Christian missionaries, E.G. Browne said:

To the Western observer, however, it is the complete sincerity of the Bábís [sic], their fearless disregard of death and torture undergone for the sake of their religion, their certain conviction as to the truth of their faith, their generally admirable conduct towards mankind and especially towards their fellow-believers, which constitutes their strongest claim on his attention.<sup>15</sup>

The figure of the Báb appealed strongly also to aesthetic sensibilities which Romanticism had awakened. Apart from those of His countrymen whose positions were threatened by His mission, surviving accounts by all who met Him agree in their description of the extraordinary beauty of His person and of His physical movements. His voice, particularly when chanting the tablets and prayers He revealed, possessed a sweetness that captivated the heart. Even His clothing and the furnishings of His simple house were marked by a degree of refinement that seemed to reflect the inner spiritual beauty that so powerfully attracted His visitors.

Particular reference must be made to the originality of the Báb's thought and the manner in which He chose to express it. Throughout all the vicissitudes of the 19th century, the European mind had continued to cling to the ideal of the 'man of destiny' who, through the sheer creative force of his untrammelled genius, could set a new course in human affairs. At the beginning of the century, Napoleon Bonaparte had seemed to represent such a phenomenon, and not even the disillusionment that had followed his betrayal of the ideal had discouraged the powerful current of individualism that was one of the Romantic movement's principal legacies to the century and, indeed, to our own.

Out of the Báb's writings emerges a sweeping new approach to religious truth. Its sheer boldness was one of the principal reasons for the violence of the opposition that His work aroused among the obscurantist Muslim clergy who dominated all serious discourse in 19th-century Persia. These challenging concepts were matched by the highly innovative character of the language in which they were communicated.

In its literary form, Arabic possesses an almost hypnotic beauty—a beauty which, in the language of the Qur'án, attains levels of the sublime which Muslims of all ages have regarded as beyond imitation by mortal man. For all Muslims, regardless of their sect, culture, or nation, Arabic is the language of Revelation par excellence. The proof of the Divine origin of the Qur'án lay not chiefly in its character as literature, but in the power its verses possessed to change human behavior and attitudes. Although, like Jesus and Muhammad before Him, the Báb had little formal schooling, He used both Arabic and His native Persian, alternately, as the themes of His discourse required.

To His hearers, the most dramatic sign of the Báb's spiritual authority was that, for the first time in more than 12 centuries, human ears were privileged to hear again the inimitable accents of Revelation. Indeed, in one important respect, the Qur'án was far surpassed. Tablets, meditations, and prayers of thrilling power flowed effortlessly from the lips of the Báb. In one extraordinary period of two days, His writings exceeded in quantity the entire text of the Qur'án, which represented the fruit of 23 years of Muhammad's prophetic output. No one among His ecclesiastical opponents ventured to take up His public challenge: "Verily We have made the revelation of verses to be a testimony for Our message to you." i.e., In the Qur'án God had explicitly established the "miracle" of the Book's power as His sole proof. "Can ye produce a single letter to match these verses? Bring forth, then, your proofs ...."<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, despite His ability to use traditional Arabic forms when He chose to do so, the Báb showed no hesitancy in abandoning these conventions as the requirements of His message dictated. He resorted freely to neologisms, new grammatical constructions, and other variants on accepted speech whenever He found existing terms inadequate vehicles for the revolutionary new conception of spiritual reality He vigorously advanced. Rebuked by learned Shí'ih mujtahids at His trial in Tabríz (1848) for violations of the rules of grammar, the Báb reminded those who followed Him that the Word of God is the Creator of language as of all other things, shaping it according to His purpose.<sup>17</sup> Through the power of His Word, God says "BE," and it is.

The principle is as old as prophetic religion;—is indeed, central to it:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. ... He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.<sup>18</sup>

The implications for humanity's response to the Messenger of God at His advent is touched on in a passage of one of Bahá'u'lláh's major works, *The Four Valleys*. Quoting the Persian poet Rúmi, He says:

The story is told of a mystic knower who went on a journey with a learned grammarian for a companion. They came to the shore of the Sea of Grandeur. The knower, putting his trust in God, straightway flung himself into the waves, but the grammarian stood bewildered and lost in thoughts that were as words that are written on water. The mystic called out to him, "Why dost thou not follow?" The grammarian answered, "O brother, what can I do? As I dare not advance, I must needs go back again." Then the mystic cried, "Cast aside what thou hast learned from Síbavayh and Qawlavayh, from Ibn-i-Ḥájib and Ibn-i-Málik, and cross the water."

With renunciation, not with grammar's rules, one must be armed:  
Be nothing, then, and cross this sea unharmed.<sup>19</sup>

For the young seminarians who most eagerly responded to Him, the originality of the Báb's language, far from creating an obstacle to their appreciation of His message, itself represented another compelling sign of the Divine mission He claimed.

It challenged them to break out of familiar patterns of perception, to stretch their intellectual faculties, to discover in this new Revelation a true freedom of the spirit.

However baffling some of the Báb's writings were to prove for His later European admirers, the latter also perceived Him to be a unique figure, one who had found within His own soul the vision of a transcendent new reality and who had acted unhesitatingly on the imperative it represented. Most of their commentaries tended to reflect the Victorian era's dualistic frame of mind and were presented as scientifically motivated observations of what their authors considered to be an important religious and cultural phenomenon. In the introduction to his translation of *A Traveler's Narrative*, for example, the Cambridge scholar Edward Granville Browne took pains to justify the unusual degree of attention he had devoted to the Bábí movement in his research work:

...here he [the student of religion] may contemplate such personalities as by lapse of time pass into heroes and demi-gods still unobscured by myth and fable; he may examine by the light of concurrent and independent testimony one of those strange outbursts of enthusiasm, faith, fervent devotion, and indomitable heroism—or fanaticism, if you will—which we are accustomed to associate with the earlier history of the human race; he may witness, in a word, the birth of a faith which may not impossibly win a place amidst the great religions of the world.<sup>20</sup>

The electrifying effect that the phenomenon exerted, however—even on a cautious and scientifically trained European intellect and after the passage of several decades—can be appreciated from Browne's concluding remarks in a major article in *Religious Systems of the World*, published in 1892, the year of Bahá'u'lláh's passing:

I trust that I have told you enough to make it clear that the objects at which this religion aims are neither trivial nor unworthy of the noble self-devotion and heroism of the Founder and his followers. It is the lives and deaths of these, their hope which knows no despair, their love which knows no cooling, their steadfastness which knows no wavering, which stamp this wonderful movement with a character entirely its own. ... It is not a small or easy thing to endure what these have endured, and surely what they deemed worth life itself is worth trying to understand. I say nothing of the mighty influence which, as I believe, the Bábí faith will exert in the future, nor of the new life it may perchance may breathe into a dead people; for, whether it succeed or fail, the splendid heroism of the Bábí martyrs is a thing eternal and indestructible.<sup>21</sup>

So powerful was this impression that most Western observers tended to lose sight of the Báb's purpose through fascination with His life and person. Browne himself, whose research made him pre-eminent among the second generation of European authorities on the Bábí movement, largely failed to grasp the role the Báb's mission played in preparing the way for the work of Bahá'u'lláh or, indeed, the way in which the achievements of the latter represented the Báb's eventual triumph and vindication.<sup>22</sup> The French writer A.L.M. Nicolas was much more fortunate, in part simply because he lived long enough to benefit from a greater historical perspective. Initially antagonistic toward what he saw as Bahá'u'lláh's "supplanting" of the Báb, he came finally to appreciate the Bahá'í view that the Báb was one of two successive

Manifestations of God whose joint mission is the unification and pacification of the planet.<sup>23</sup>

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This brief historical framework will be of assistance in understanding the thrust of the Báb's teachings. In one sense, His message is abundantly clear. As He repeatedly emphasized, the purpose of His mission and the object of all His endeavors was the proclamation of the imminent advent of "Him Whom God will make manifest," that universal Manifestation of God anticipated in religious scriptures throughout the ages of human history. Indeed, all of the laws revealed by the Báb were intended simply to prepare His followers to recognize and serve the Promised One at His advent:

We have planted the Garden of the Bayán [i.e., His Revelation] in the name of Him Whom God will make manifest, and have granted you permission to live therein until the time of His manifestation; ...<sup>24</sup>

The Báb's mission was to prepare humanity for the coming of an age of transformation beyond anything the generation that heard Him would be able to understand. Their duty was to purify their hearts so that they could recognize the One for Whom the whole world was waiting and serve the establishment of the Kingdom of God. The Báb was thus the "Door" through which this long-awaited universal theophany would appear.

At the time of the appearance of Him Whom God will make manifest the most distinguished among the learned and the lowliest of men shall both be judged alike. How often the most insignificant of men have acknowledged the truth, while the most learned have remained wrapt in veils.<sup>25</sup>

Significantly, the initial references to the Promised Deliverer appear in the Báb's first major work, the *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá'*, passages of which were revealed by Him on the night of the declaration of His mission. The entire work is ostensibly a collection of commentaries on the *Súrih* of Joseph in the *Qur'án*, which the Báb interprets as foreshadowing the coming of the Divine "Joseph," that "Remnant of God" Who will fulfill the promises of the *Qur'án* and of all the other scriptures of the past. More than any other work, the *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá'* vindicated for Bábís the prophetic claims of its Author and served, throughout the early part of the Báb's ministry, as the *Qur'án* or the Bible of His community.

O peoples of the East and the West! Be ye fearful of God concerning the Cause of the true Joseph and barter Him not for a paltry price established by yourselves, or for a trifle of your earthly possessions, that ye may, in very truth, be praised by Him as those who are reckoned among the pious who stand nigh unto this Gate.<sup>26</sup>

In 1848, only two years before His martyrdom, the Báb revealed the *Bayán*, the book which was to serve as the principal repository of His laws and the fullest expression of His theological doctrines. Essentially the book is an extended tribute to the coming Promised One, now invariably termed "Him Whom God will make

manifest.” The latter designation occurs some 300 times in the book, appearing in virtually every one of its chapters, regardless of their ostensible subject. The Bayán and all it contains depend upon His Will; the whole of the Bayán contains in fact “nought but His mention”; the Bayán is “a humble gift” from its Author to Him Whom God will make manifest; to attain His Presence is to attain the Presence of God. He is “the Sun of Truth,” “the Advent of Truth,” “the Point of Truth,” “the Tree of Truth”.<sup>27</sup>

I swear by the most holy Essence of God—exalted and glorified be He—that in the Day of the appearance of Him Whom God shall make manifest a thousand perusals of the Bayán cannot equal the perusal of a single verse to be revealed by Him Whom God shall make manifest.<sup>28</sup>

Some of the most powerful references to the subject are contained in tablets which the Báb addressed directly to Him Whom God would soon make manifest:

Out of utter nothingness, O great and omnipotent Master, Thou hast, through the celestial potency of Thy might, brought me forth and raised me up to proclaim this Revelation. I have made none other but Thee my trust; I have clung to no will but Thy Will. Thou art, in truth, the All-Sufficing and behind Thee standeth the true God, He Who overshadoweth all things.<sup>29</sup>

Apart from this central theme, the Báb’s writings present a daunting problem for even those Western scholars familiar with Persian and Arabic. To a considerable degree, this is due to the fact that the works often address minute matters of Shí‘ih Islamic theology which were of consuming importance to His listeners, whose minds had been entirely formed in this narrow intellectual world and who could conceive of no other. The study of the organizing spiritual principles within these writings will doubtless occupy generations of doctoral candidates as the Bahá’í community continues to expand and its influence in the life of society consolidates. For the Bábís, who received the writings at first hand, a great deal of their significance lay in their demonstration of the Báb’s effortless mastery of the most abstruse theological issues, issues to which His ecclesiastical opponents had devoted years of painstaking study and dispute. The effect was to dissolve for the Báb’s followers the intellectual foundations on which the prevailing Islamic theological system rested.

A feature of the Báb’s writings which is relatively accessible is the laws they contain. The Báb revealed what is, at first sight, the essential elements of a complete system of laws dealing with issues of both daily life and social organization. The question that comes immediately to the mind of any Western reader with even a cursory familiarity with Bábí history is the difficulty of reconciling this body of law which, however diffuse, might well have prevailed for several centuries, with the Báb’s reiterated anticipation that “He Whom God will make manifest” would shortly appear and lay the foundations of the Kingdom of God. While no one knew the hour of His coming, the Báb assured several of His followers that they would live to see and serve Him. Cryptic allusions to “the year nine” and “the year nineteen” heightened the anticipation within the Bábí community. No one could falsely claim to be “He Whom God will make manifest,” the Báb asserted, and succeed in such a claim.

It is elsewhere that we must look for the immediate significance of the laws of the Bayán. The practice of Islam, particularly in its Shí‘ih form, had become a matter of adherence to minutely detailed ordinances and prescriptions, endlessly elaborated by

generations of mujtahids, and rigidly enforced. The sharí'a, or system of canon law, was, in effect, the embodiment of the clergy's authority over not only the mass of the population but even the monarchy itself. It contained all that mankind needed or could use. The mouth of God was closed until the Day of Judgment when the heavens would be cleft asunder, the mountains would dissolve, the seas would boil, trumpet blasts would rouse the dead from their graves, and God would "come down" surrounded by angels "rank on rank."

For those who recognized the Báb, the legal provisions of the Bayán shattered the clergy's institutional authority at one blow by making the entire sharí'a structure irrelevant.<sup>30</sup> God had spoken anew. Challenged by a superannuated religious establishment which claimed to act in the name of the Prophet, the Báb vindicated His claim by exercising, in their fullness, the authority and powers that Islam reserved to the Prophets. More than any other act of His mission, it was this boldness that cost Him His life, but the effect was to liberate the minds and hearts of His followers as no other influence could have done. That so many laws of the Bayán should shortly be superseded or significantly altered by those laid down by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas<sup>31</sup> was, in the perspective of history and in the eyes of the mass of the Bábís who were to accept the new Revelation, of little significance once the Báb's purpose had been accomplished.

In this connection, it is interesting to note the way in which the Báb dealt with issues that had no part in His mission, but which, if not addressed, could have become serious obstacles to His work because they were so deeply and firmly imbedded in Muslim religious consciousness. The concept of *jihád* or "holy war," for example, is a commandment laid down in the Qur'án as obligatory for all able-bodied male Muslims and one whose practice has figured prominently in Islamic societies throughout the ages. In the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá', the Báb is at pains to include a form of *jihád* as one of the prerogatives of the station which He claims for Himself. He made any engagement in *jihád*, however, entirely dependent on His own approval, an approval which He declined to give. Subsequently, the Bayán, although representing the formal promulgation of the laws of the new Dispensation, makes only passing reference to a subject which had so long seemed fundamental to the exercise of God's Will. In ranging across Persia to proclaim the new Revelation, therefore, the Báb's followers felt free to defend themselves when attacked, but their new beliefs did not include the old Islamic mandate to wage war on others for purposes of conversion.<sup>32</sup>

In the perspective of history, it is obvious that the intent of these rigid and exacting laws was to produce a spiritual mobilization, and in this they brilliantly succeeded. Foreseeing clearly where the course on which he was embarked would lead, the Báb prepared His followers, through a severe regimen of prayer, meditation, self-discipline, and solidarity of community life, to meet the inevitable consequences of their commitment to His mission.

The prescriptions in the Bayán extend, however, far beyond those immediate purposes. Consequently, when Bahá'u'lláh took up the task of establishing the moral and spiritual foundations of the new Dispensation, He built directly on the work of the Báb. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the "Mother Book" of the Bahá'í era, while not presented in the form of a systematic code, brings together for Bahá'ís the principal laws of their Faith. Guidance that relates to individual conduct or social practice is set in the framework of passages which summon the reader to a challenging new conception of human nature and purpose. A 19th-century Russian scholar who made one of the early

attempts to translate the book compared Bahá'u'lláh's pen writing the Aqdas to a bird, now soaring on the summits of heaven, now descending to touch the homeliest questions of everyday need.

The connection with the writings of the Báb is readily apparent to anyone who examines the provisions of the Aqdas. Those laws of the Bayán which have no relevance to the coming age are abrogated. Other prescriptions are reformulated, usually through liberalizing their requirements and broadening their applications. Still other provisions of the Bayán are retained virtually in their original form. An obvious example of the latter is Bahá'u'lláh's adoption of the Báb's calendar, which consists of 19 months of 19 days each, with provision for an "intercalary" period of four or five days devoted to social gatherings, acts of charity, and the exchange of gifts with friends and family.

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**A**part from the specific laws of the Bayán, the Báb's writings also contain the seeds of new spiritual perspectives and concepts which were to animate the worldwide Bahá'í enterprise. Beginning from the belief universally accepted by Muslims that God is one and transcendent, the Báb cuts sharply through the welter of conflicting doctrines and mystical speculations that had accumulated over more than 12 centuries of Islamic history. God is not only One and Single; He is utterly unknowable to humankind and will forever remain so. There is no direct connection between the Creator of all things and His creation.

The only avenue of approach to the Divine Reality behind existence is through the succession of Messengers Whom He sends. God "manifests" Himself to humanity in this fashion, and it is in the Person of His Manifestation that human consciousness can become aware of both the Divine Will and the Divine attributes. What the scriptures have described as "meeting God," "knowing God," "worshiping God," "serving God," refers to the response of the soul when it recognizes the new Revelation. The advent of the Messenger of God is itself "the Day of Judgment." The Báb thus denies the validity of Súfí belief in the possibility of the individual's mystical merging with the Divine Being through meditation and esoteric practices:

Deceive not your own selves that you are being virtuous for the sake of God when you are not. For should ye truly do your works for God, ye would be performing them for Him Whom God shall make manifest and would be magnifying His Name. ... Ponder awhile that ye may not be shut out as by a veil from Him Who is the Dayspring of Revelation.<sup>33</sup>

Going far beyond the orthodox Islamic conception of a "succession" of the Prophets that terminates with the mission of Muhammad, the Báb also declares the Revelation of God to be a recurring and never-ending phenomenon whose purpose is the gradual training and development of humankind. As human consciousness recognizes and responds to each Divine Messenger, the spiritual, moral, and intellectual capacities latent in it steadily develop, thus preparing the way for recognition of God's next Manifestation.

The Manifestations of God—including Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad—are one in essence, although their physical persons differ, as do those aspects of their teachings that relate to an ever-evolving human society. Each can be said to have two "stations": the human and the Divine. Each brings two proofs of His mission: His own

Person and the truths He teaches. Either of these testimonies is sufficient for any sincerely inquiring soul; the issue is purity of intention, and this human quality is particularly valued in the Báb's writings. Through unity of faith, reason and behavior, each person can, with the confirmations of God, reach that stage of development where one seeks for others the same things that one seeks for oneself.

Those who sincerely believe in the Messenger whose faith they follow are prepared by it to recognize the next Revelation from the one Divine Source. They thus become instruments through which the Word of God continues to realize its purpose in the life of humankind. This is the real meaning of the references in past religions to "resurrection." "Heaven" and "hell," similarly, are not places but conditions of the soul. An individual "enters" paradise in this world when he recognizes God's Revelation and begins the process of perfecting his nature, a process that has no end, since the soul itself is immortal. In the same way, the punishments of God are inherent in a denial of His Revelation and disobedience to laws whose operation no one can escape.

Many of these concepts in the Báb's writing can appeal to various references or at least intimations in the scriptures of earlier religions. It will be obvious from what has been said, however, that the Báb places them in an entirely new context and draws from them implications very different from those which they bore in any previous religious system.

The Báb described His teachings as opening the "sealed wine" referred to in both the Qur'án and New Testament. The "Day of God" does not envision the end of the world, but its perennial renewal. The earth will continue to exist, as will the human race, whose potentialities will progressively unfold in response to the successive impulses of the Divine. All people are equal in the sight of God, and the race has now advanced to the point where, with the imminent advent of Him Whom God will manifest, there is neither need nor place for a privileged class of clergy. Believers are encouraged to see the allegorical intent in passages of scriptures which were once viewed as references to supernatural or magical events. As God is one, so phenomenal reality is one, an organic whole animated by the Divine Will.

The contrast between this evolutionary and supremely rational conception of the nature of religious truth and that embodied by 19th-century Shí'ih Islam could not have been more dramatic. Fundamental to orthodox Shí'ism—whose full implications are today exposed in the regime of the Islamic Republic in Iran—was a literalistic understanding of the Qur'án, a preoccupation with meticulous adherence to the sharí'a, a belief that personal salvation comes through the "imitation" (*taqlíd*) of clerical mentors, and an unbending conviction that Islam is God's final and all-sufficient revelation of truth to the world. For so static and rigid a mindset, any serious consideration of the teachings of the Báb would have unthinkable consequences.

The Báb's teachings, like the laws of the Bayán, are enunciated not in the form of an organized exposition, but lie rather embedded in the wide range of theological and mystical issues addressed in the pages of His voluminous writings. It is in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh that, as with the laws of the Bayán, these scattered truths and precepts are taken up, reshaped, and integrated into a unified, coherent system of belief. The subject lies far beyond the scope of this brief paper, but the reader will find in Bahá'u'lláh's major doctrinal work, the Kitáb-i-Íqán ("Book of Certitude"), not only echoes of the Báb's teachings, but a coherent exposition of their central concepts.

Finally, a striking feature of the Báb's writings, which has emerged as an important element of Bahá'í belief and history, is the mission envisioned for "the peoples of the West" and admiration of the qualities that fit them for it. This, too, was in dramatic contrast to the professed contempt for *farangi* and "infidel" thought that prevailed in the Islamic world of His time. Western scientific advancement is particularly praised, for example, as are the fairness of mind and concern for cleanliness that the Báb saw Westerners on the whole as tending to display. His appreciation is not merely generalized but touches on even such mundane matters as postal systems and printing facilities.

At the outset of the Báb's mission, the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá' called on "the peoples of the West" to arise and leave their homes in promotion of the Day of God:

Become as true brethren in the one and indivisible religion of God, free from distinction, for verily God desireth that your hearts should become mirrors unto your brethren in the Faith, so that ye find yourselves reflected in them, and they in you. This is the true Path of God, the Almighty ....<sup>34</sup>

To a British physician who treated Him for injuries inflicted during his interrogation in Tabríz, the Báb expressed His confidence that, in time, Westerners, too, would embrace the truth of His mission.

This theme is powerfully taken up in the work of Bahá'u'lláh. A series of "tablets" called on such European rulers as Queen Victoria, Napoleon III, Kaiser Wilhelm I, and Tsar Alexander II to examine dispassionately "the Cause of God." The British monarch is warmly commended for the actions of her government in abolishing slavery throughout the empire and for the establishment of constitutional government. Perhaps the most extraordinary theme the letters contain is a summons, a virtual mandate to "the Rulers of America and the Presidents of the Republics therein." They are called on to "bind ... the broken with the hands of justice" and to "crush the oppressor who flourisheth with the rod of the commandments of their Lord."<sup>35</sup>

Anticipating the decisive contribution which Western lands and peoples are destined to make in founding the institutions of world order, Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

In the East the Light of His Revelation hath broken; in the West have appeared the signs of His dominion. Ponder this in your hearts, O people ....<sup>36</sup>

It was on 'Abdu'l-Bahá that responsibility devolved to lay the foundations for this distinctive feature of the missions of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Visiting both Western Europe and North America in the years 1911–1913, He coupled high praise for the material accomplishments of the West with an urgent appeal that they be balanced with the essentials of "spiritual civilization."

During the years of World War I, after returning to the Holy Land, 'Abdu'l-Bahá drafted a series of letters addressed to the small body of Bahá'u'lláh's followers in the United States and Canada, summoning them to arise and carry the Bahá'í message to the remotest corners of the globe. As soon as international conditions permitted, these Bahá'ís began to respond. Their example has since been followed by members of the many other Bahá'í communities around the world which have proliferated during subsequent decades.

To the North American believers, too, 'Abdu'l-Bahá confided the task of laying the foundations of the democratically elected institutions conceived by Bahá'u'lláh for

the administration of the affairs of the Bahá'í community. The entire decision-making structure of the present-day administrative system of the Faith at local, national, and international levels, had its origins in these simple consultative assemblies formed by the American and Canadian believers.

Bahá'ís see a parallel pattern of response to the Divine mandate, however unrecognized, in the growing leadership Western nations have assumed throughout the present century in the efforts to bring about global peace. This is particularly true of the endeavor to inaugurate a system of international order. For his own vision in this respect, as well as for the lonely courage that the effort to realize it required, “the immortal Woodrow Wilson” won an enduring place of honor in the writings of the *Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith*.

Bahá'ís are likewise aware that it has been such governments as those of Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia which have taken the lead in the field of human rights. The Bahá'í community has experienced at first hand the benefits of this concern in the successful interventions undertaken on behalf of its members in Iran during the recurrent persecutions under the regimes of the Pahlavi shahs and the Islamic Republic.

Nothing of what has been said should suggest an uncritical admiration of European or North American cultures on the part of either the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh nor an endorsement of the ideological foundations on which they rest. Far otherwise. Bahá'u'lláh warns in ominous tones of the suffering and ruin that will be visited upon the entire human race if Western civilization continues on its course of excess. During His visits to Europe and America, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called on His hearers in poignant language to free themselves, while time still remained, from racial and national prejudices, as well as materialistic preoccupations, whose unappreciated dangers, He said, threatened the future of their nations and of all humankind.

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**T**oday, a century and a half after the Báb's mission was inaugurated, the influence of His life and words has found expression in a global community drawn from every background on earth. The first act of most Bahá'í pilgrims on their arrival at the World Centre of their Faith is to walk up the flower-bordered avenue leading to the exquisite Shrine housing the Báb's mortal remains, and to lay their foreheads on the threshold of His resting place. They confidently believe that, in future years, “pilgrim kings” will reverently ascend the magnificent terraced staircase rising from the foot of the “Mountain of God” to the Shrine's entrance, and place the emblems of their authority at this same threshold. In the countries from which the pilgrims come, countless children from every background and every language today bear the names of the Báb's martyred companions—Tahirih, Quddús, Husayn, Zaynab, Vahid, Anís—much as children throughout the lands of the Roman empire began 2,000 years ago to carry the unfamiliar Hebrew names of the disciples of Jesus Christ.

Bahá'u'lláh's choice of a resting place for the body of His Forerunner—brought with infinite difficulty from Persia—itself holds great significance for the Bahá'í world. Throughout history the blood of martyrs has been “the seed of faith.” In the age that is witnessing the gradual unification of humankind, the blood of the Bábí martyrs has become the seed not merely of personal faith, but of the administrative institutions which are, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, “the nucleus and the very pattern” of the World Order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh. The relationship is symbolized by the supreme

position that the Shrine of the Báb occupies in the progressive development of the administrative center of the Bahá'í Faith on Mount Carmel.

Few there must be among the stream of Bahá'í pilgrims entering these majestic surroundings today whose minds do not turn to the familiar words in which the Báb said farewell 150 years ago to the handful of His first followers, all of them bereft of influence or wealth and most of them destined, as He was, soon to lose their lives:

The secret of the Day that is to come is now concealed. It can neither be divulged nor estimated. The newly born babe of that Day excels the wisest and most venerable men of this time, and the lowliest and most unlearned of that period shall surpass in understanding the most erudite and accomplished divines of this age. Scatter throughout the length and breadth of this land, and, with steadfast feet and sanctified hearts, prepare the way for His coming. Heed not your weaknesses and frailty; fix your gaze upon the invincible power of the Lord, your God, the Almighty. ... Arise in His name, put your trust wholly in Him, and be assured of ultimate victory.<sup>37</sup>

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## Notes

1. Mullá Husayn-i-Bushru'í.
2. The anniversary of the birth of the Báb is commemorated on the day following the occurrence of the eighth new moon in the Bahá'í year, which moves between mid-October and mid-November; His declaration, 23 or 24 May; and His martyrdom, 9 or 10 July.
3. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 8 (London: Oxford, 1954), 117.
4. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, 2d rev ed (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), 123–24.
5. I owe this interesting suggestion to Dr. Hossain Danesh.
6. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (1944; reprint, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), 56, and *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 9, 1940–1944 (1945; reprint, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), 588.
7. Persistent use of the term “Bábí” in Iranian Muslim attacks on the Bahá'í Faith over the years has tended to be a reflection of the spirit of animosity incited by its original 19th-century clerical opponents.
8. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, bk. 4, ll. 569–78.
9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, S.E. Wricher, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 115–16.
10. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King: The Passing of Arthur*, ll. 408–10.
11. Muhammad-i-Zarandí (Nabil-i-A'zam), *The Dawn-breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, translated from the Persian by Shoghi Effendi (1932; reprint, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), 93.
12. The Báb, together with a young follower, was suspended by ropes from a courtyard wall in the citadel in Tabriz, and an Armenian Christian regiment, whose commander had expressed great uneasiness about the assignment, was ordered to open fire on the prisoners. When the smoke from the 750 rifles had cleared, near pandemonium broke out among the crowd of spectators thronging the roofs and walls. The Báb's companion was standing uninjured at the foot of the wall, and the Báb Himself had disappeared from view. The entire volley had done no more than sever the ropes. The Báb had returned to the room in which He had been held, in order to complete instructions to His amanuensis, which had been interrupted by His jailers. The Armenian regiment immediately left the citadel, refusing any further participation. It would

have taken only a gesture of encouragement from the Báb for the crowd, now in a state of intense excitement aroused by what they regarded as “a miracle,” to have delivered Him from His captors. When He did not take advantage of this opening, the authorities eventually recovered their composure and summoned a regiment of Muslim soldiers who carried out the planned execution. Though dramatic, the incident was not an isolated event in the Báb’s ministry. Four years earlier, the wealthy and powerful Governor of Isfáhán, Manúchir Khán, who was the Báb’s host and warm admirer, had offered to march on the capital with his army and induce Persia’s feeble ruler, Muhammad Sháh, to meet the Báb and listen to His message. The offer was courteously declined, and Manúchir Khán’s subsequent death led directly to the Báb’s arrest, imprisonment and execution.

13. Ernest Renan, *Les Apôtres*, translated from the French by William G. Hutchison (London: Watts & Co., 1905), 134. “For his sake, thousands of martyrs flocked to their death. A day unparalleled perhaps in the world’s history was that of the great massacre of the Bábís at Teheran. ‘On that day was to be seen in the streets and bazaars of Teheran,’ says a narrator, who has first-hand knowledge, ‘a spectacle which it does not seem that the populations can ever forget.... Women and children advanced, singing a verse, which says: ‘In truth we come from God, and unto him we return.’” The narrator referred to is J.A. de Gobineau, 3d ed., *Les Religions et les Philosophies dan l’Asie Centrale* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900), 304 et seq.
14. *The Dawn-breakers*, 65.
15. E.G. Browne, introduction to Myron H. Phelps, *Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi*, 2d rev ed (New York; London: G.P. Putname’s Sons: The Knickerbocker Press, 1912), xvi.
16. The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1976), 43.
17. *The Dawn-breakers*, 321–22.
18. John 1:1–10, Authorized (King James) Version.
19. Bahá’u’lláh, *The Call of the Divine Beloved* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 219), 88–89. At the time of this article’s original publication, an earlier translation of The Four Valleys was used. This article has been updated to reflect the new authorized translation of the work.
20. E.G. Browne, Introduction to *A Traveler’s Narrative: Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Báb*, by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Trans. E.G. Browne (New York: Bahá’í Publishing Committee, 1930), viii.
21. E.G. Browne, “Bábism,” *Religious Systems of the World*, 3d ed (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. and New York: MacMillan & Co., 1892), 352–53.
22. Browne’s objectivity appears to have been clouded, as well, by his hope that the Bábís would focus their energies on the political reform of Persia itself. Criticizing what he saw as Bahá’u’lláh’s diversion of Bahá’í energies from domestic politics to the cause of world unity, he complained that “... just now it is men who love their country above all else that Persia needs.” English introduction to the Nuqtatu’l-Káf, cited in H.M. Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá’í Faith* (London: George Ronald, 1970), 88.
23. *The Bahá’í World*, vol. 9, 1940–44 (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1945), 584–85.
24. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, 135.
25. *Ibid.*, 91.
26. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, 49.
27. Persian Bayán, unpublished manuscript. References to units and chapters 7.1; 5.7; 4.1; and 7.11.
28. *Selections from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, 104.
29. *Ibid.*, 59.
30. The challenge came into sharp focus for the Báb’s leading followers at a conference held at the small hamlet of Badašht in 1848. Interestingly, the figure who took the lead in bringing about a realization of the magnitude of the spiritual and intellectual changes set in motion by the Báb was a woman, the gifted poetess Táhirih who was also later to suffer martyrdom for her beliefs.
31. “The Most Holy Book,” Bahá’u’lláh’s charter for a new world civilization, written in Arabic in 1873.
32. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Bahá’u’lláh formally abolishes holy war as a feature of religious life. See William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin, *The Bahá’í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), 13–14.
33. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, 86.
34. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, 56.
35. Bahá’u’lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 88.
36. Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), 13.

37. *The Dawn-breakers*, 94.

