THE BAHÁ'Í PRINCIPLE OF RELIGIOUS UNITY AND
THE CHALLENGE OF RADICAL PLURALISM

THESIS

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The Bahá'í principle of religious unity is unique among the world's religious traditions in that its primary basis is found within its own sacred texts and not in commentaries of those texts. The Bahá'í principle affirms the existence of a common transcendent source from which the religions of the world originate and receive their inspiration. The Bahá'í writings also emphasize the process of personal transformation brought about through faith as a unifying factor in all religious traditions. The apparent differences between the world's religious traditions are explained by appealing to a perspectivist approach grounded in a process metaphysics. For this reason, I have characterized the Bahá'í view as "process perspectivism". Radical pluralism is the greatest philosophical challenge to the Bahá'í principle of religious unity. The main criticisms made by the radical pluralists are briefly examined.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Bahá’í Faith, a relatively new religion which has its beginnings in the middle of the nineteenth century, has some 5.3 million adherents world wide, with half living in Asia and 360,000 living in North America. Members of the Bahá’í Faith are found in 205 countries representing over 2112 minority groups and tribes, making it the most widespread world religion after Christianity.¹ At present, Bahá’ís currently reside in over 112,000 cities, towns and villages worldwide.

Historical Summary

The Bahá’í Faith developed out of the Shi’i Islamic tradition of Persia, what is now Iran.² On the evening of May 23, 1844 Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad (1819-1850) declared the He was the promised Qá’ím (Ar. "he who ariseth") and


²More specifically, the Bábí faith grew out of the Shaykhi school, a late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reform movement within Shi’ism. The Shaykhi school was founded by Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i (1752-1825). For a detailed discussion on the Shaykh school and its profound influence on the Bábí and Bahá’í faiths, see Vahid Rafati’s informative essay "The Development of Shaykhi Thought in Shi’i Islam," in Heshmat Moayyad, ed. The Bahá’í Faith and Islam, Proceedings of a Symposium, McGill University, March 23-25, 1984 (Ottawa, Canada: Association for Bahá’í Studies, 1990), pp. 93-109.
al-Mahdí (Ar. "one who is guided") of Shi‘í Islám. Such messianic titles refer to the successor of Muhammad, who according to the Shi‘í tradition of Islám, would revitalize and renew Islám and usher in the promised day of judgement (Ar. yawn ad-dín). Siyyid ‘Ál-Muhammad referred to Himself as the Bábú‘lláh (Ar. "gate of God," a reference to the hidden twelfth Imám of Shi‘á Islám), and He is generally known in the West as "the Báb." Despite the incredible nature of these claims, the Báb soon attracted hundreds of dedicated followers who were known as Bábís. The nature of the Báb’s claims together with the growing number of converts quickly aroused the attention of Iran’s religious and civil authorities who began to actively repress the fledgling Bábí community. Persecution of the Bábís ranged from the seizing of their properties, to banishment, to the taking of their lives, often by bloody public executions at the hands of brutal mobs. Since the Bahá’í Faith’s inception, it is estimated that some 20,000 Bábís were put to death as martyrs. Thus the early history of the Bahá’í Faith is similar to early Christian history, especially in its struggle to gain recognition of its claim to embody a unique and independent revelation. The intense persecution of the Bábí community reached its apex on July 9, 1850, when the Báb and

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3According to Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, "pronouns referring to the Manifestation [e.g. Christ, Bahá‘u’lláh, the Báb, Muhammad, etc.], or the Master ['Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá‘u’lláh] should, however, invariably be capitalized" (from a letter written on behalf of the Guardian, dated 11/8/48, qtd. in Hornby, Helen, comp. Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference File [New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1983], p. 376, #1015). In order to respect this guideline, all such pronouns will be capitalized in this thesis.
one of His disciples, were publicly executed by a firing squad composed of 750 soldiers.

Among the many teachings the Báb propounded was the notion that He was the herald of a greater messenger, or to use the Bahá'í term, "manifestation," to come. The Báb referred to this next manifestation as "Him whom God shall make manifest" (Ar. Man yuzhiruhu'lláh). In the spring of 1863, one of His prominent followers, Mírzá Husayn 'Alí (1817-1892), proclaimed that He was the promised one foretold by the Báb. He took the title of Bahá'u'lláh, which in Arabic means "the Glory of God," and soon attracted a large number of followers, who eventually became know as Bahá'ís. Bahá'u'lláh spent nearly forty years of His life either in prison, exile, or traveling to and from various places of exile and imprisonment. By His own reckoning, He claims to have authored or "revealed" the equivalent of over one hundred volumes of sacred writings. 4

Shortly before His death, in May of 1892, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His son Abbás Effendi (1844-1921) as His successor and sole interpreter of His writings. Abbás Effendi took the title 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Ar. "Servant of the Glory").

4Most of these writings are considered to be direct revelations from God to Bahá'u'lláh, while others are considered to be inspired by God. In almost all cases Bahá'u'lláh would dictate such writings to a secretary who would first take down such dictations in a kind of shorthand and would then later transcribe them to a legible manuscript which Bahá'u'lláh would very often peruse, make corrections where necessary, and often authenticate with one of His seals. The speed with which Bahá'u'lláh would reveal such writings was sometimes so fast that even the shorthand of His secretary was nearly illegible.
‘Abdu’l-Bahá, together with the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, are referred to collectively as the three Central Figures of the Bahá’í Faith. For the next thirty years ‘Abdu’l-Bahá administered the affairs of the Bahá’í community, wrote numerous books and lengthy letters and traveled to Europe and America in the years of 1911 and 1912. Shortly before His own death, He appointed His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1957) as the Guardian and Interpreter of the Bahá’í Faith. In 1963, the international Bahá’í community elected nine members to the newly created Universal House of Justice (Ar. Baytu’l-’Adl-i-A’zam). The Universal House of Justice is mentioned in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, and it is charged with the task of administering the affairs of the international Bahá’í community and to legislate on matters not specifically mentioned in the sacred writings. Its members are currently elected every five years by an international convention of delegates convened at the Bahá’í World Centre in Haifa, Israel.

The Bahá’í Faith’s Relationship to Islám

The Bahá’í Faith is similar to Islám, especially Shí’í Islám, in many of its theological concepts and ritual practices. For instance, a striking similarity exists between the “five pillars” (Ar. arkan ad-dín) of Islám and certain Bahá’í practices (see Appendix A). The Islámic concept of tawhíd (the verbal noun of wáhhadá, “to make one,” hence the principle of the absolute oneness of God) and tanzíh (lit. “the elimination” of blemishes or of anthropomorphic traits, in other words,
the assertion of God's complete transcendence and incomparability) both have their parallels in Bahá'í theology (see appendix A). Both religions also share in common the principle of progressive revelation -- that all religions are divine in origin and that they have been progressively revealed to humankind throughout history. Bahá'ís, like Muslims, stress that religion has been and will continue to be the foundation and main influence operating in all great civilizations. In summarizing the similarities between these two faiths, Heshmat Moayyad, a scholar of Near East languages, points out that

the intrinsic unity of Islám and the Bahá'í Faith is demonstrated in Bahá'í Scriptures by countless quotations from the Qur'án and hadith and by repeated allusions to Islámic history, in general, and to the life of Muham-mad, in particular. Even the religious terminology used in Bahá'í works is mainly derived from Islámic theology.

However, the Bahá'í tradition also differs on a number of important theological points. Some of the more important differences are (1) the full

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6Heshmat Moayyad, "The Historical Interrelationship of Islam and the Bahá'í Faith," in Heshmat Moayyad, ed. The Bahá'í Faith and Islam, Proceedings of a Symposium, McGill University, March 23-25, 1984 (Ottawa, Canada: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1990), p. 76. This article gives a very good summary of the similarities and differences that exist between Islam and the Bahá'í Faith.
recognition of the inherent equality of men and women, both in theory and in practice, based on the principle of complimentarity as well as equal access to education, career opportunities and leadership roles, including the unrestricted promotion of interracial, interreligious and international marriages for both men and women; (2) the prohibition of practicing outdated received and traditional ways of doing things (Ar. taqlid), whether secular or religious; (3) the denial of the traditional interpretation that Muhammad is the seal (or last) of the prophets (Ar. khátam al-nabiyyín), coupled with the Bahá'í claim that the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are the fulfillment of Islam's apocalyptic and messianic expectations -- the main cause of so much of the persecution leveled against the Bahá'ís;⁷ and (4) a pronounced emphasis on the symbolic interpretation of scripture (Ar. ta'wil) over one that is more literal (Ar. tafsír).

Bahá'í Principles

The following teachings make up the traditional list of fundamental principles that Bahá'ís include in nearly all of their introductory material.

1. The unity and ultimate unknowableness of God.

2. The oneness of religion. All religions share a common foundation.

⁷For a full discussion both of the traditional Muslim belief that Muhammad is the "seal of the prophets" -- God's final prophet sent to humankind -- and the Bahá'í interpretation, see Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir "A Bahá'í Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam"; soon to be published in a forthcoming volume of the Journal of Bahá'í Studies.
3. The oneness of humanity. The peoples of the earth are all equal in the sight of God.

4. The elimination of all forms of prejudice, including those based on racial, economic, intellectual, religious, sexual, or national factors.

5. Everyone is responsible for investigating the truth for themselves. There are no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith.

6. The establishment of a universal auxiliary language to be learned in addition to one's native tongue.

7. The fundamental equality of men and women based on the principle of complimentarity.

8. Universal education.


10. The elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth.

11. The establishment of a world commonwealth.

12. The protection and encouragement of cultural diversity based on the Bahá'í principle of "unity in diversity."

13. A spiritual solution to economic problems.

14. The establishment of an international tribunal.⁶

This list is neither comprehensive nor indicative of the breadth or diversity of Bahá'í teachings on a wide variety of theological, practical, and mystical subjects. Indeed, after 'Abdu'l-Bahá presents a similar list of principles, He

⁶See, for instance, the introductory pamphlet entitled "The Bahá'í Faith," (Dallas, Texas: The Bahá'í Office of Public Information, Dallas/Fort Worth), 1989. For the scriptural basis for such a list of principles see Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By 281-82 or 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá #227, p. 304.
concludes that “such teachings are numerous.” While much could be said about any of these teachings, I will concentrate in this work on explaining and clarifying the second principle, that of the oneness of religion. In addition, I will compare this Bahá’í principle to other contemporary western responses to religious pluralism. I will then characterize the Bahá’í view in light of these responses, and finally examine some of the common criticisms leveled against it.

Sacred Texts and Writings

As the Bahá’í tradition is still in its infancy, many aspects of its religious life are not as yet formalized. While no canon or officially approved list of documents has yet been formulated, a provisional list of authoritative texts can be made. It should be noted that the Universal House of Justice is currently in the process of collecting all written documents from the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Many of these documents have just recently been located. As an indication of the scale of this task, it is estimated that Bahá’u’lláh wrote some 15,000 books, treatises, epistles and letters in both Arabic and Persian. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote some 27,000, also in both Arabic and Persian, and Shoghi Effendi, some 17,000, in Arabic, Persian and English. The Universal House of Justice reports that nearly all of these documents are in its

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possession. Needless to say, this huge volume of documents has not been thoroughly scrutinized, systematically arranged, nor fully appreciated. While the most significant sacred writings have been translated into English, as well as other European and world languages, a large proportion of it remains untranslated in the original languages of Arabic and Persian.

Shoghi Effendi clearly states that the Bahá'í sacred scriptures consist of "the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá ..." and that "Nothing can be considered scripture for which we do not have an original text." Elsewhere He further elaborates that

Bahá'u'lláh has made it clear enough that only those things that have been revealed in the form of Tablets [divinely revealed written works] have a binding power over the friends. Hearsay may be matters of interest but can in no way claim authority.... This being a basic principle

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10 Portions of the Sacred Writings have been translated into over 760 languages, including many tribal languages such as Dinka (Africa), Athabascan, Aleut, Navajo (North America), and Timorese (Asia). For a complete list of languages into which Bahá'í works have been translated see John Huddleston, The Earth is But One Country (London, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), Appendix III.

of the Faith we should not confuse Tablets that were actually revealed and mere talks attributed to the Founders of the Cause. The first have absolute binding authority while the latter can in no way claim our obedience....

The word tablets, found in the previously cited passage, is the English translation of the Arabic lawh (pl. alwah, lit. "tablets," a reference to the Laws of Moses), meaning any divinely revealed scripture. Occasionally the Arabic word surih (also sura, lit. "a row or series," a reference to the chapters or subdivisions of the Qur'án) is also translated as tablet. Both words refer generally to the written works of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, all of which are considered to be sacred writings or scriptures. In fact, the words lawh and surih are often used in the titles of Their written works.

Given these initial guidelines, the Bahá'í canon would consist of two types of documents: the first are the sacred writings of the "Central Figures" (the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá) and the second are the authoritative writings of Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice. The Bahá'í

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canon would not include the published talks or recorded utterances of these
four individuals nor such utterances made by members of the Universal House
of Justice, nor would it include hearsay, or what Bahá'ís refer to as "pilgrims' notes" -- notes taken by individual Bahá'ís of lectures and informal discussions
given by the Central Figures, Shoghi Effendi, and members of the Universal
House of Justice. Thus, unlike Islám, little importance is given in the Bahá'í
Faith to the sayings (or *ahadith*, literally "the sayings or traditions" of Muham-
mad) of its founders and administrative authorities. Furthermore, the writings of
Bahá'u'lláh take precedence over all other sacred writings, followed by the
writings of the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of
Justice, in decreasing order of importance in terms of scriptural authority.

Much of the Bahá'í scriptures translated into English consist of compila-
tions of letters, essays, and excerpts from various books, letters, or essays,
although many complete works do exist in English translation, including such
writings of Bahá'u'lláh as the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ("The Most Holy Book," 1992, the
Bahá'í book of laws), the *Kitáb-i-Ígán* ("The Book of Certitude," 1950,
Bahá'u'lláh's most significant theological work), and the *Lawh-i-Ibn-i-Dhi'b* ("The
Epistle to the Son of the Wolf," 1976). Some of the more important compilations
of Bahá'í sacred scriptures (many of which are frequently quoted in this work)
include *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* (1976), *Gleanings from the
Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (1952), *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh* (1974),
CHAPTER II

THE BAHÁ'Í CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS UNITY

Every religion, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, has a particular focus, a central theme around which all of its principles, teachings and laws turn. For the Bahá'í Faith, this central theme "is the consciousness of the oneness of mankind." Indeed, Shoghi Effendi asserts that the oneness of humanity is the "the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the Faith..." and the one "...round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve." For Bahá'u'lláh, the members of the human family, whether Caucasian, Asian, African and so on, are fundamentally one, the same; with skin color or average height being superficial and unsubstantial differences which in no wise contradict this basic unity.

An important element in the consciousness and appreciation of the oneness of humanity is the Bahá'í principle of the unity of the world's religions. For 'Abdu'l-Bahá, it is "the corner-stone" of the oneness of all people and the


very foundation for its realization in the world of human affairs. Furthermore, Shoghi Effendi asserts that the Bahá’í principle of the unity of the world’s religious traditions, with all of its ramifications, is “the fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá’u’lláh.”

The Bahá’í concept of religious unity may well be unique in the history of religion, since unlike other similar views, it is one of the central principles of the Bahá’í Faith and its direct and primary basis is found within its own sacred writings as opposed to interpretations and commentaries on such writings. Indeed, there is no lack of scriptural references to this important principle in the Bahá’í canon, nor are such references obscure. In fact, an entire volume, the Kitáb-i-Iqán (Ar. "The Book of Certitude"), is primarily devoted to this theme.

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4 The Promised Day is Come, p. v.

5 John Hick notes that the principle of religious unity, whether inclusivistic or pluralistic (see Chapter 3 for the definitions of these terms) are found "within each of the world’s religions, although not as central themes" ("Religious Pluralism," Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. 12, p. 331).

6 The Kitáb-i-Iqán together with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Ar. "The Most Holy Book," the book of Bahá’í law) are considered the two most important works of Bahá’u’lláh. In addition, numerous individual writings of both Bahá’u’lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá discuss the concept of religious unity. This principle is also one of the constant themes in the public talks given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and it is also discussed in some length in the letters of Shoghi Effendi.
A problem arises, however, the moment one begins to review the literature written by Bahá'í scholars on the theme of religious unity. It seems that for Bahá'ís, the principle of religious unity is so central to their faith, so obvious and compelling, that little if any writing has been done on this subject. No theological discussion of its implications or potential problems, has ever been thought through or worked out in any detail within the Bahá'í community. Even in a recent Bahá'í publication designed to serve as a possible textbook on the Bahá'í Faith, a scant three pages are devoted to the principle of religious unity. The discussion that follows does little to deal with the very real and serious issues with which such a position must grapple.

The Bahá'í view raises a number of questions. In those writings where the principle of religious unity is mentioned it is often unclear what the Bahá'í writings intend by the use of such phrases as "the religions of God," "all religions," "the divine religions" or "all the Prophets." Do such phrases mean what Muslims intend by the term ahl al-kitáb, literally "the people of the Book" (i.e. Jews, Christians, Muslims, and perhaps Zoroastrians)? In many instances, the only examples cited in the Bahá'í corpus are from these traditions. In fact, in the sacred writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, these are the only religious tradi-

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tions mentioned. Or do such phrases also include the religious traditions of Asia (e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Chinese religions, and so on) since these faiths are occasionally mentioned, but only in the writings of `Abdu’l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice? Or does the Bahá’í view also include the vast and varied so-called "tribal," "indigenous," or "pre-literate" traditions of the world as well? In any case, it raises questions about the very real and profound differences that exist between the various religious traditions, let alone those differences that exist within each one. Again, it may be that what is intended by such phrases is not to be taken literally but symbolically. This raises the further question of whether the Bahá’í view is a descriptive statement about the world’s religions or a symbolic one devoid of any cognitive content? Is the Bahá’í view an assertion about the true nature of religion, or a symbolic or mythological one designed to awaken the importance of faith within an individual and provide a coherent world view designed to foster better relations between Bahá’ís and the people of other faiths? Despite the existence of a number of capable Bahá’í scholars around the world, answers to these questions have not been worked out in any detail.

Transcendent Unity

According to the Bahá’í view, the nature of reality is ultimately a unity, in contrast to a view that would postulate a multiplicity of differing or incommensurate realities. The nature of truth, according to the Bahá’í writings, is thus
fundamentally unitary and not pluralistic. In a talk delivered in New York City in December of 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "oneness is truth and truth is oneness which does not admit of plurality." At a talk in Paris early that year, 'Abdu'l-Bahá admits that "Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one."

The Bahá'í principle of the unity of religions is grounded on this basic conception of reality. This principle, so frequently discussed in the Bahá'í sacred writings, asserts that a common transcendent truth not only lies above the varying and divergent religious traditions, but is in fact, their ultimate source and inspiration. For example, The Báb, claims in The Book of Names (Ar. Kitáb-i-Asmá) that "every religion proceedeth from God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting" while Bahá'u'lláh, in referring to the religions of the world, writes that "These principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are rays of one Light." In the most direct

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10The Báb, Selections from the Writings of the Báb (Bahá'í World Centre (Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), p. 139 and Bahá'u'lláh, The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 13. The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf was written in 1892, about a year before Bahá'u'lláh's death, making it the last of His books. It is significant in that it represents Bahá'u'lláh's own summary of the salient features and central themes of the religious process He Himself set in motion.
and concise passage on the subject that I am aware of, Bahá'u'lláh maintains that the revelation which each Manifestation or Messenger of God receives "is exalted above the veils of plurality and the exigencies of number." Finally, in The Most Holy Book (Ar. Kitáb-i-Aqdas) Bahá'u'lláh even refers to God as "the Lord of all Religions."  

It should be clear from the passages quoted above that the Bahá'í principle of religious unity affirms the existence of a common transcendent source from which the world's religious traditions originate and receive their inspiration. As such, the Bahá'í view is remarkably similar to the thought of Frithjof Schuon, a Swiss scholar of religion who persuasively argues for what he terms the "transcendent unity of religions" which he claims is the foundation of and lies at the very heart of every religious tradition. Like the Bahá'í Faith, Schuon holds that the religions of the world originate from the same ultimate source. "The Divine Will," writes Schuon, "has distributed the one Truth under different forms or, to express it in another way, between different humanities" or

1Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 153.


cultures. Writing on the same subject and with similar language, Bahá'u'lláh insists that

There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed.

It should be obvious from this reference that Bahá'u'lláh, like Schuon, is not affirming that all religions are the same, for He alludes to the differences between them. Indeed, He claims that the religions of the world only seem to be dissimilar due to "the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated." In other words, the apparent differences that exist among the various religious traditions are due to particular cultural and historical factors.

While this explanation is widely appealed to throughout the Bahá'í writings, it is certainly not unique to the Bahá'í Faith. Such factors have been

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14 The Transcendent Unity of Religions, p. 17.
16 Ibid., pp. 79-80.
recognized and discussed by a number of scholars of religion. For instance, the philosopher of religion, Patrick Burke, argues that

The principle by which religions resemble and differ from one another is not religious, but cultural. Similarities and differences between religions are similarities and differences between cultures.... It is these cultural elements that confer on any particular religion its distinctive identity.... What appear to be conflicts between religious faiths must be seen then, first and foremost as conflicts between cultural values.17

Nevertheless, the Bahá’í writings are quite explicit that such differences are not intrinsic with nor innate to the ultimate source of these religions. Thus, in Bahá’u’lláh’s concluding remarks about the prophets of God -- the founders of the world’s religions -- He argues

It is clear and evident, therefore, that any apparent variation in the intensity of their light is not inherent in the light itself, but should rather be attributed to the varying receptivity of an ever-changing world. Every Prophet Whom the Almighty and Peerless Creator hath purposed to send to the peoples of the earth hath been entrusted with a Message, and

charged to act in a manner that would best meet the requirements of the age in which He appeared.\textsuperscript{18}

The Twofold Nature of Every Religion

While the Bahá'í principle of religious unity does not claim that all the religions are the same, it does claim that they all share certain fundamental and essential features which are distinguished from other nonessential aspects related to the historical, cultural and linguistic context in which each religious tradition develops. Consequently, the Bahá'í writings, while recognizing the existence of religious diversity, seek to explain it as secondary to an essential transcendent unity common to all religious traditions. For example, in a talk delivered at the Church of the Ascension, in New York City, on June 2, 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá presents an often repeated explanation of the Bahá'í view of religious unity, a view which is known as "the twofold nature of religion":

The religions of God have the same foundation, but the dogmas appearing later have differed. Each of the divine religions has two aspects. The first is essential. It concerns morality and development of the virtues of the human world. This aspect is common to all. It is fundamental; it is one; there is no difference, no variation in it. As regards the inculcation of

\textsuperscript{18}Gleanings, p. 79-80, #34. See note 51, p. 39 in this chapter for a fuller discussion of the Bahá'í concept of the prophet or manifestation of God.
The Bahá’í concept of the twofold nature of religion distinguishes between two basic aspects that are held to be characteristic of every religious tradition: the first is characterized as "essential" or "fundamental" and refers to spiritual matters, while the second is characterized as "nonessential" or "accidental" and refers to matters related to the material or physical world. The essential aspect consists of "fundamental" and "universal truths" which are considered to be changeless and eternal and which constitute "the one foundation of all the religions of God." 20 These universal truths lie at the core of every religious tradition and, according to the Bahá’í writings, consist of faith in God (or in nontheistic terms, ultimate reality), existential truths of life, the awakening of human potential, and the acquisition of spiritual attributes or virtues. 21 On the
acquisition of such virtues, John Hick argues that "love, compassion, generous concern for and commitment to the welfare of others is a central ideal" in each of the world's religious traditions.22

In contrast, the nonessential aspect of religion involves the outward form of religious practice and operates within the sphere of linguistic, cultural and historical circumstances. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá argues that the "divine religions of the Holy Manifestations of God are in reality one though in name and nomenclature they differ."23 In addition, the nonessential aspect further consists of the social laws and regulations governing human affairs as well as ritual practices and doctrinal beliefs, which vary in every age and culture and even within any one religious tradition, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has so persuasively argued.24 For example, most if not all religious traditions place great importance on the institution of marriage and the role of the family, but they all differ virtues that when 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was asked in Paris, "What is the purpose of our lives?", He responded, "To acquire virtues" (Paris Talks 177). For a Bahá'í discussion on the universality of the so-called "golden rule," see H.T.D. Rost, The Golden Rule: A Universal Ethic (Oxford: George Ronald, 1986).

22An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1989), p. 316. Hick devotes the entire eighteenth chapter of this work demonstrating the universality of this point.

23Promulgation, p. 151.

on the particulars of the marriage ceremony; the rights and obligations of the husband, wife, and children; and the circumstances under which divorce is granted.

The distinction made between the essential and nonessential aspects of religion is not unique to Bahá’í theology. It resembles closely the "form versus content" or "accident versus essence" debate over the content of myth. In his comprehensive four volume work on mythology, *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell makes the distinction between what he calls the local manifestation of myth and ritual within a particular culture (what the Bahá’í writings call the nonessential or accidental aspects) and the universal aspects (what the Bahá’í writings refer to as the essential or fundamental aspects) which go beyond what is historically and culturally determined.\(^2\) As is the case with the Bahá’í view, it is the local manifestations of the universal aspects that differ and seem at variance with one another. Campbell based his conception of the local and universal aspects of myth on the earlier work of the German sociologist Adolf Bastian (1826-1905) who distinguished between what he called the "elementary ideas" (Elementargeclanke) that are found worldwide from their local manifestations in what he termed "ethnic ideas" (Volkergedanke).

Faith: A Common Denominator

In addition to the recognition of a transcendent unity of religions, the Bahá'í writings also emphasize the process of personal transformation brought about through faith as a unifying factor in all religious traditions. For this reason, the Bahá'í scriptures make a distinction between institutionalized religion, which involves ritual performance, traditional practice, and accumulated doctrine, and faith -- that deeply personal attitude, feeling and inward response of an individual to the transcendent, a response that usually has a powerful transforming effect on an individual and expresses itself in outward practice and belief.

In the Bahá'í sacred writings, the Arabic word imán is usually translated into English as the word faith.29 According to the Islámic scholar Cyril Glasse, imán refers to "those articles of belief which are part of Islám" such as "faith in God, His Angels, His books (revelations), His Prophets, and the Day of Judgement." Imán is also understood as one of three aspects that make up Islám as religion (Ar. dí̱n̂), those other two being Islám (the rites, practices, and laws) and ihásán (lit. "virtue" or "excellence"). However, as with the corresponding English terms religion and faith; imán, Islám, and dí̱n̂ are often used ambiguously and interchangeably. Despite such ambiguity, philosophers, theologians,

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and scholars of religion often distinguish between the concepts of faith on the one hand and religion or practice on the other.

Shoghi Effendi often draws a distinction between faith and religion in his letters to individual Bahá'ís. In such letters he frequently contrasts those Bahá'ís "whose religion is Bahá'í," those who merely "accept and observe the teachings" or who call themselves Bahá'ís, from those "who live for the Faith," whose lives are transformed, "ennobled and enlightened."

He further clarifies this difference by contrasting "spiritual awareness" (personal faith) with "administrative procedure" and "adherence to rules" (institutionalized religion). For example, he writes that

The need is very great, everywhere in the world, in and outside the [Bahá'í] Faith, for a true spiritual awareness to pervade and motivate people's lives. No amount of administrative procedure or adherence to rules can take the place of this soul-characteristic, this spirituality which is the essence of man.\(^{28}\)

\(^{28}\)Excerpts from the Writings of the Guardian on the Bahá'í Life, comp. by The Universal House of Justice (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, n. d.), pp. 18, 10; and Hornby, Lights of Guidance, p. 418, #1139.

\(^{29}\)Excerpts p. 12.
Indeed, the Guardian characterizes such spiritual awareness as "that mystical feeling which unites man with God" and which, he declares, is at "the core of religious faith."\(^{30}\) Elsewhere he maintains that

The Bahá’í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man which first has to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide. Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá’u’lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into mere organization, and become a dead thing.\(^{31}\)

He further claims that the fundamental purpose of religion is to bring man nearer to God, and to change his character, which is of the utmost importance. Too much emphasis is often laid on the social

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\(^{30}\) Qtd. in Hornby, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 418, #1139.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 81, #247.
and economic aspects of the Teachings; but the moral aspect cannot be overemphasized.\textsuperscript{32}

Once again, it is the moral life and the personal response of the individual to divinity that is considered the basis of the religious life; a life that must be transformed through the acquisition of virtues and the spiritual nourishment of prayer and meditation, and not the mere adherence to various doctrines and teachings, nor the pious participation in ceremonies and rituals, holidays and commemorations. Thus, Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, distills down the essence of the Bahá'í view to the following statement:

Every other Word of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings is a preaching on moral and ethical conduct; all else is the form, the chalice, into which the pure spirit must be poured; without the spirit and the action which must demonstrate it, it is a lifeless form.\textsuperscript{33}

This distinction between the spirit and the form of religious faith, is echoed in the words of the great Hindu teacher Sri Ramakrishna when he pleads

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., p. 417, #1136.

\textsuperscript{33}From a letter dated September 30, 1949, in Hornby, \textit{Lights of Guidance}, #1159.
Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each [person], which is spirituality ... Earn that first, acquire that, criticise no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them.34

Thus, it should be clear that when the Bahá’í writings declare that the religious traditions share certain fundamental and essential aspects, it is primarily the transforming power of faith and its effects upon the individual and upon society as a whole that is meant. In other words, it is the religious life itself, the process of transformation which brings the individual nearer to God or ultimate reality, that is considered an essential feature of every religion. And while the particular path or outward expression may vary, it is the result or goal, and the process which leads to it, that are held to be the same. To take an obvious analogy: there are many paths and approaches that may be used to scale a difficult and challenging mountain (differences in technique, equipment used, and so on) but they all share a common goal -- reaching the summit.35

Or, seen from a more philosophical perspective, Hick has effectively argued that

34 Qtd. in Vivekananda, Ramakrishna and His Message, 1971., p. 25.

35 For a full account of this analogy see Ronald Eyre’s illuminating discussion in his book Ronald Eyre on the Long Search (Cleveland: William Collins, 1979) pp. 275-76.
the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of,
and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from
within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that within
each of them the transformation of human existence from self-
centredness to Reality-centredness is manifestly taking place -- and
taking place, so far as human observation can tell, to much the same
extent. Thus the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alterna-
tive soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which, men and
women can find salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfillment.36

Accordingly, for Hick, while the various religious traditions differ in terms of their
outward expression or linguistic form, in their attempts to describe and ap-
proach "the Real" (his general term for divinity or the absolute) and to transform
individual lives, yet they all appear to be involved in a similar process. Perhaps,
too, this is what Ramakrishna was referring to when he suggests that

As one and the same water, is called by different names in different
languages, one calling it "water," another "Vatri," a third "aqua," and a
fourth "Pani," so the one Sachchidananda, Absolute Being-Intelligence-
Bliss, is invoked by some as God, by some as Allah, by some as Hari,
and by others as Brahman.... As one can ascend to the roof of a house

by means of a ladder or a bamboo, or a staircase or in various other ways, so diverse are the ways and means to approach God. Every religion in the world is one of the ways to reach Him.\(^{37}\)

In all of the cases that I have considered thus far, it is terminology and outward practice that are held to differ, while the process, the conscious and active life of faith and its effects on the individual, is declared as being common to the various religious traditions. Similarly, in his influential book \textit{The Meaning and End of Religion}, Smith argues that

... faith differs in form, but not in kind. This applies both within communities and from one community to another. My observation, as a historian of religion, would be put thus: in so far as he or she has been saved, the Muslim has been saved by Islamic faith (faith of an Islamic form, through Islamic patterns; faith mediated by an Islamic context); the Buddhist by Buddhist faith, the Jew by Jewish... just as Christians have been saved by faith of a Christian form, so have Muslims by faith of an Islamic, Buddhists by Buddhist.\(^{38}\)


In this same work, Smith further demonstrates that while almost all cultures have a word for faith or its equivalents (i.e. piety, religiosity, reverence), very few have a term corresponding to the Western notion of religion as an empirical phenomenon and an overt system of principles and practices separate from other aspects of life. In fact, Smith argues that when a culture coins a word for 'religion' as an overt abstract system, it is well on its way to losing sight of the importance of faith.

As I have argued, the Bahá'í writings contrast faith with religion, that system of practices and traditions, rites and beliefs, that, if followed only in an outward sense, often degenerates into a mere organization. It is religion as mere organization, devoid of the transforming power of faith, that the Bahá'í writings point to as the source of so much of the diversity, conflict and dissen-sion that often characterize the religious traditions of the world. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in his talks given in America, constantly argues this point. For instance, in his talk delivered to the Universalist Church of Washington D.C. in 1912, he maintains that

The foundations of the divine religions are one. If we investigate these foundations, we discover much ground for agreement, but if we consider

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the imitations of forms and ancestral beliefs, we find points of disagree-
ment and division; for these limitations differ while the sources and
foundations are one in the same.40

Later that year, in a talk delivered at the Foyer de L’ame in Paris, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
reiterates this point

All these divisions we see on all sides, all these disputes and opposition,
are caused because men cling to ritual and outward observances, and
forget the simple, underlying truth. It is the outward practices of religion
that are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity -- while
the reality is always the same, and one. The Reality is the Truth, and
truth has no division.41

Consequently, it should be clear that the Bahá’í concept of religious unity
is not some isolated or obscure notion, since it has its parallel expressions in
such diverse thinkers as Ramakrishna, Hick, Schuon, Campbell, and W. C.
Smith. It is equally clear that the Bahá’í concept is not so much about the
existence of similar doctrines or beliefs, but rather about the transformation

40Promulgation, p. 41.
41Paris Talks, pp. 120-21.
which religion is capable of bringing about in the moral and religious life of an individual -- a life transformed and animated by and through the power of faith.

Exegesis of Important Terms and Phrases

A full understanding of the Bahá'í principle of religious unity rests significantly upon how key Bahá'í terminology and phrases are to be understood and interpreted. Since the majority of religious terminology used in the Bahá'í scriptures is derived from Islámic theology, most of the exegesis which follows will depend heavily on Islámic sources.

To begin with, how are the phrases "all religions" and "all the Prophets" -- both of which are used in the Bahá'í scriptures to refer collectively to the world's religions -- to be interpreted? These phrases together with similar ones such as "the divine religions" or "the religions of God" are the usual English translations of the corresponding Arabic or Persian terms. The phrase "all religions" is the English translation of the Arabic al-adyan kulliha and the Persian jami'-yi adyan. For example, see Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 80, 158; Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 22, 87, 205; and Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Iqán, p. 40.

Adyan is the plural of dín, the Arabic and Persian word for "religion," while kulliha and jami are the Arabic and Persian words for "all."}

Islamic sources define dīn as "'religion' in the broadest sense," thus, it "may mean any religion" or even religious knowledge as opposed to intellectual knowledge; but it is primarily used in the Qur'ān to refer to "the religion of Islām" (Ar. dīn al-Islām).

When other religions are mentioned in the Qur'ān, the Arabic word millā (lit. "religion" or "sect") is used; however, this meaning is now largely obsolete in the Arabic speaking world. Nevertheless, the phrase "all religions" and its variants is still unclear, for it is not immediately obvious what religious traditions are intended by such phrases.

As a partial clarification, the authoritative writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi do include the names of other religions. For example, in the letters written in English and on behalf of Shoghi Effendi there is reference made to the "nine existing religions," those being the Bahá’í Faith, the religion of the Báb, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islām, and the religion of the Sabians. Within the Bahá’í scriptures, the number nine is symbolic for completeness or wholeness because it is seen as the completion

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46From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated July 28, 1936, quoted in Hornby, Lights of Guidance, #829. 'Abdu’l-Bahá also mentions these religions in many of his public talks in America and Europe (see Paris Talks and The Promulgation of Universal Peace).
or culmination of the single digit numbers. Consequently, the use of the phrase "nine existing religions" metaphorically refers to all religions, and while the Bahá’í writings recognize the problematic and controversial nature of such a list, they do not consider these nine religions as "the only true religions that have appeared in the world." In fact, other religious groups (e.g. "the Confucianists," the Sikhs, and Native Americans) are mentioned in a positive manner in the Bahá’í writings.

The reference to the Sabians as one of the "nine existing religions" is obscure. However, the meaning of this term will shed light on what the Bahá’í writings intend by such phrases as "all the religions." The Sabians (Ar. Sabi, pl. Sabi).

47From two letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi. The first is dated October 28, 1949 and the other is dated July 28, 1936. Both letters are in Hornby, Lights of Guidance, #831 and #829.

48In reference to the "Confucianists," 'Abdu'l-Bahá attests that "Confucius renewed morals and ancient virtues ...", however, He goes on to argue that the beliefs and rites of the Confucianists have diverged greatly from the fundamental teachings of Confucius (Some Answered Questions [Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981], p. 165. In the so-called "Tablet of Purity," 'Abdu'l-Bahá, while not mentioning the Sikhs by name, commends them as a community of people "far and away superior to others" due to their strict avoidance of alcohol, opium and tobacco, as well as for their strength, courage, health, and physical beauty (in Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá [Haifa, Israel: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978], p. 150). In the Tablets of the Divine Plan, 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares the Native American Indians of today with the seventh century pre-Islámic Arabs who, when inspired by the teachings of Muhammad, illumined the whole world" ([Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1977], p. 32-33). Elsewhere in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi predictions are made that the Aboriginal peoples of the Americas will play a major role in the spiritualization of the planet.
Sabī'un; also spelled as 'Sabians') are first mentioned in the Qur'ān (2:59, 5:73, and 22:17), but their identity is problematic. The Qur'ān identifies the Sabians, along with the Jews and the Christians (and by implication, the Zoroastrians) as ahl al-Kitāb (lit. "the people of the book"), those who have received revealed scriptures. The Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam states that two distinct groups have been identified with this name:

1. the Mandaeans or Subbas, a Judeo-Christian sect practicing the rites of baptism in Mesopotamia (Christians of John the Baptist); 2. The Sabaeans of Harran, a pagan sect which survived for a considerable period under Islam ...

A positive identification of the Sabians is further hampered by the fact that many groups, upon encountering Islám, often claimed to be the Sabians mentioned in the Qur'ān in order to be under the Qur'ānic privileges and protection associated with the ahl al-Kitāb. Furthermore, sympathetic Muslims frequently employed the term upon encountering peoples of diverse religious faiths. Accordingly, the designation "Sabians," as it is used in the Islámic world, appears to be inclusive in nature, and may thus be used in reference to any religion not specifically mentioned in the Qur'ān. Indeed, Glasse, in summing up the problems associated with the term, concludes
The very fact that many different groups were assimilated to the name and that it is impossible to fix the Koranic term definitely to any one of them, suggests that the concept of the Sabians was an open door for the toleration to any religion which upon examination appeared to be an authentic way of worshipping God.\(^9\)

Moreover, since the term Sabians was applied to so-called "pagan" groups (religions other than Christianity, Judaism or Islám; or religions that pre-date them) its use may best be interpreted as metaphorically referring to all tribal or indigenous religions. This interpretation would certainly make better sense of the Bahá’í listing of the "nine existing religions," since tribal or pre-literate religions, which number some ninety-two million people world wide,\(^0\) don't appear to be directly mentioned otherwise.

In the Bahá’í scriptures, the phrases "all the Prophets" or "all the Prophets of God" are often used to refer collectively to various prophets, or to use the Bahá’í term, "manifestations" (Ar. mazhar, "manifestation" of the essence of God) -- those extraordinary individuals who initiated and founded the various

\(^9\)Concise Encyclopedia of Islam.

\(^0\)Barrett, David B. "World Religious Statistics." 1992 Britannica Book of the Year.
religious traditions. Such phrases are the English translations of the Persian jami' anbiyá. Anbiyá is the plural of the Arabic and Persian word nabí, meaning a prophet, that is, one "whose mission lies within the framework of an existing religion" (i.e. Ezekiel or Isaiah), as opposed to a rasúl ("Messenger" or "Envoy," pl. rusúl), one "who brings a new religion or major new revelation," such as Christ or Muhammad. In the Qur'án, a nabí is also called a bashir ("he who brings glad-tidings") and a nadhir ("a warner"). Rusúl are also called al-mursalin ("those who are sent"). In addition, the Bahá'í scriptures also use the Persian

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51 The Bahá'í concept of the "manifestation" of God is not one of divine incarnation (Ar. hulul, lit. "indwelling") where the essence of God descends into human form like the Christian concept of Christ or that of the avatara in the Vaishnavite tradition of Hinduism. Rather, the Bahá'í view likens the manifestation of God to a perfectly polished mirror which reflects or manifests the attributes of God. Thus, in such a view, God remains utterly transcendent, above ascent or descent, incarnation or indwelling, while the manifestation of god is understood as a unique human being capable of reflecting a perfect image of the attributes of God. Bahá'u'lláh, in a discussion of the nature of the manifestation, explains: "However, let none construe these utterances to be anthropomorphism, nor see in them the descent of the worlds of God into the grades of the creatures; nor should they lead thine Eminence to such assumptions. For God is, in His Essence, holy above ascent and descent, entrance and exit; He hath through all eternity been free of the attributes of human creatures, and ever will remain so" (The Seven Valleys [Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975], pp. 22-23). For a more complete discussion of the Bahá'í concept of the manifestation see Juan Ricardo Cole, "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings," Bahá'í Studies, Vol. 9 (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1982).

phrases mazahir-i jami'ih ("the all-embracing Manifestations") and hamih mursalund ("all the Messengers") when referring to the prophets of God.  

According to the British historian of religion, Geoffrey Parrinder, the Qur'án mentions twenty-eight prophets and messengers by name (see Appendix B for a complete listing) -- including many of those mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament. The Qur'án, however, does not seem to limit their number to twenty-eight. In fact, it indicates that there have been countless prophets sent throughout the history of the human race. For many of these prophets, the details of their lives are lost in the mists of ancient history and prehistory. In reference to these prophets the Qur'án states:

And We have already sent Messengers [Ar. rusúl] before Thee [Muhammad]: of some We have told Thee, and others We have told Thee nothing ... (Qur'án 40:78, see also Qur'án 4:162)

And there never was a people without a Warner [Ar. nadhir] having lived among them. (Qur'án 35:24)  

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53Lawson, letter to the author, dated May 28, 1992. A good discussion of these terms is also found in Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir, "A Bahá'í Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam," which will be published in a forthcoming volume of the Journal of Bahá'í Studies.

No doubt on this basis, later Islamic theologians and scholars put the number of prophets much higher than twenty-eight, by some accounts as high as 224,000. Indeed, even in the Ahadith, the collected sayings of Muhammad, the number of prophets is symbolically said to be 124,000, a number so large as to both dazzle the imagination and prevent humanity from claiming that it was not adequately warned of universal judgement.58

Like the Qur'án, the Bahá'í scriptures contain the names of a number of prophets and messengers. To be precise, at least thirty-two prophets are mentioned by name in the Bahá'í writings, twenty-three of which are identical to those mentioned in the Qur'án (see Appendix B for a complete listing). What is significantly different about the prophets named in the Bahá'í writings is, whereas the Qur'án names only prophets associated with the Judeo-Christian-Muslim heritage, the Bahá'í scriptures include "prophets" or "messengers" from Asian cultures -- for example, Zoroaster (Zarathustra), The Buddha, and Krishna.

Also like the Qur'án, the Bahá'í writings do not limit the number of prophets to thirty-two. Thus the Bab declares that "God hath raised up Prophets and revealed Books as numerous as the creatures of the world, and will

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continue to do so to everlasting. This would, theoretically at least, make the number of prophets practically infinite, or at the very least, even larger than the highest numbers mentioned in Islam. In fact, Shoghi Effendi, while quoting from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, asserts that

From the "beginning that has no beginning," these Exponents of the Unity of God and Channels of His incessant utterance [the prophets of God] have shed the light of the invisible Beauty upon mankind, and will continue, to the "end that hath no end," to vouchsafe fresh revelations of His might and additional experiences of His inconceivable glory. To contend that any particular religion is final, that "all Revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the Daysprings of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, that the ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the Tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest" would indeed be nothing less than sheer blasphemy.

Clearly then, the Bahá'í writings recognize the existence of vast numbers of prophets or manifestations whom have appeared in all cultures throughout the

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56 An excerpt from the Dalá'il-i-Sab'ih (Ar. "The Seven Proofs"), in Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 125.

57 World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 58.
entire history of the human race. Thus, given such references, the phrase "all the prophets" is best interpreted as broadly and as open ended as possible. Such an interpretation would include all known historical prophets, messengers and founders of the world's religions, whether of the past, present or future, together with all those whose identity has now been lost. Likewise, the phrase "all religions" should also be interpreted in the widest possible context to include all known existing religions together with those which are no longer practiced.
CHAPTER III

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE BAHÁ'Í VIEW

The Problem of Religious Pluralism

The term "religious pluralism" is used in at least two distinct ways by scholars of religion. One meaning expresses the growing tendency toward openness, tolerance and inter-religious dialogue found among many modern religious communities, while a second meaning takes note of the tremendous diversity found both within and among the world's religious traditions.\(^1\) It is especially within the context of this second meaning that one may speak of a theology or even a philosophy of religious pluralism. This chapter will focus on this second aspect of religious pluralism, especially as it pertains to the Bahá'í view of religious unity.

Over the centuries, a number of distinct theories have been propounded to explain the tremendous variety observed in the world's religious traditions -- what Wilfred Cantwell Smith aptly characterizes as "the arresting diversity of

\(^1\)In his review of *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. Harold G. Coward (State University of New York Press, 1987), Mark Jurgensmeyer notes that in "the recently revised version of Claude Welch and John Dillenberger's *Protestant Christianity*, the authors have added a new concluding chapter describing what they regard as the most significant new trend in Protestant thought: theologies of religious pluralism" ("Book Reviews," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 56, no. 4, p. 773).
mankind's faith."\textsuperscript{2} Such religious diversity is what many historians of religion refer to as the problem of religious pluralism. According to John Hick, "the term religious pluralism refers simply to the fact that the history of religions shows a plurality of traditions and a plurality of variations within each."\textsuperscript{3}

Typology of Responses to Religious Pluralism

In his essay, "Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge," the philosopher of religion Raimundo Panikkar presents a typology of six possible options for coming to terms with religious pluralism. Panikkar divides these options into two broad categories: the first five he groups under "monistic options" and the sixth he assigns to what he call the "non-dualistic option."

A. Monistic Options: All approaches to the problem of religious pluralism in which truth is said to be one: either one for all or one for every single individual.

1. Exclusivism: Only one religion is true. All the others are, at best, approximations.


2. Inclusivism: Religions refer ultimately to the same truth although in different manners and approximations. They all point to Reality and may all be included in a single world view [the Bahá'í view is often characterized as such].

3. False Claims: All religions are false because of the falsity of their claims. There is no such ultimate destiny or Reality.

4. Subjectivism: Each religion is true because it is the best for its adherents. Truth is subjective.

5. Historical Process: Religions are the product of history and thus both similar and different according to the historical factors that have shaped them.

B. Non-dualistic Option:

6. Radical pluralism / post-modernism: Each religion has unique features and presents mutually incommensurable insights. Each statement of a basic experience is to be evaluated on its proper terrain and merits, because the very nature of truth is pluralistic.⁴

Panikkar finds fault with the first five options and makes a strong case for option six, that of radical pluralism. While the Bahá’í tradition accepts religious diversity, it acknowledges a common source for the world’s religions and it recognizes certain underlying patterns and trends that historical and cultural factors both partially obscure and reveal. On the surface, the Bahá’í view of religious unity seems to be inclusivistic, although a more careful examination of the Bahá’í view reveals that it incorporates elements of perspectivism, perennial philosophy, and historical process.

In the remainder of this chapter I will characterize the Bahá’í view in light of Panikkar’s typology. Finally, in Chapter IV, I will briefly examine some contemporary Western theories of religious pluralism that are similar to the Bahá’í view. In doing so, I will also evaluate some of the main criticisms levelled against all such theories.

The Bahá’í Repudiation of Religious Exclusivity

In characterizing the Bahá’í view, three of Panikkar’s options can be immediately ruled out. Obviously the Bahá’í principle of religious unity does not assert the falsity of religious claims nor does it deny the existence of a divine or ultimate reality. On the contrary, the Bahá’í view holds that the world’s religious traditions originate from the same ultimate reality and consequently, that they all contain certain truths. It should also be obvious that the Bahá’í view cannot be
considered subjectivistic, since it holds that religious truths, especially those which concern the nature of ultimate reality, are not simply what I or anyone else make them out to be. Indeed, Bahá’í theology is grounded in the notion that ultimate reality is completely beyond the comprehension of human beings. This universal human limitation is the reason the Bahá’í writings address the need for an intermediary (what Bahá’ís call a “manifestation of God,” Ar. mazhar) whose primary function is to reveal religious truths.⁵

Finally, and most significantly, the Bahá’í view is clearly not exclusivistic. Nowhere in the Bahá’í corpus do we find the claim that one and only one religion is true or correct, to the exclusion of all the rest. Indeed, a central Bahá’í principle related to the oneness of religion is that “religious truth is not absolute but relative,” that it is not static but dynamic and that the process of “Divine Revelation is progressive, not final.”⁶ In fact, according to Shoghi Effendi, Bahá’u’lláh not only repudiated the claim of any religion to be a final revelation, but He also disclaimed the finality of His own revelation:

⁵See Chapter 2, note 51, p. 39 for a more complete discussion of the Bahá’í concept of manifestation.

Repudiating the claim of any religion to be the final revelation of God to man, disclaiming finality for His own Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh inculcates the basic principle of the relativity of religious truth, the continuity of Divine Revelation, the progressiveness of religious experience.  

The Bahá'í repudiation of religious exclusivism is more fully elaborated by Shoghi Effendi in his essay "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh." Near the end of this powerfully written essay he unequivocally asserts that

... great as is the power manifested by this Revelation and however vast the range of the Dispensation its Author has inaugurated, it emphatically repudiates the claim to be regarded as the final revelation of God's will and purpose for mankind. To hold such a conception of its character and functions would be tantamount to a betrayal of its cause and a denial of its truth. It must necessarily conflict with the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final. Indeed, the categorical rejection by the followers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh of the claim to finality which any religious system inaugurated by the Prophets of the past may

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advance is as clear and emphatic as their own refusal to claim that same finality for the Revelation with which they stand identified. To believe "that all revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the daysprings of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, that the ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the Tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest" must constitute in the eyes of every follower of the Faith a grave, an inexcusable departure from one of its most cherished and fundamental principles.  

Bahá’í Inclusivism: An Oversimplification

Several writers of histories of religion have characterized the Bahá’í view as being inclusivist. For instance, Mary Pat Fisher and Robert Luyster, in their new textbook Living Religions, cite the Bahá’í Faith as one of several examples of inclusivism. While Huston Smith does not use the term in The World’s Religions, a revised version of his popular textbook The Religions of Man, his discussion of the Bahá’í Faith would clearly place it in this category. There is

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8World Order of Bahá'u'lláh p. 115. The underlined portion of this passage is a quotation from Bahá'u'lláh found in the Kitáb-i-Iqán, p. 137.

also what appears to be direct scriptural evidence within the Bahá'í writings to support an inclusivist label. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written that

The Bahá'í Cause is an inclusive movement; the teachings of all religions and societies are found here.... The Bahá'í message is a call to religious unity and not an invitation to a new religion, not a new path to immortality. God forbid! It is the ancient path cleared of the debris of imaginations and superstitions of men, of the debris of strife and misunderstanding ...

‘Abdu'l-Bahá claims that the Bahá'í Faith is not simply another religion, but "the ancient path," which his father, Bahá'u'lláh, describes as "the changeless Faith of God [Ar. dín Alláh], eternal in the past, eternal in the future."

It is by reading these and other such passages in isolation from the vast and overall context of the Bahá'í sacred writings that one may find superficial support for characterizing the Bahá'í Faith as inclusivistic. However, the inclusivist label is far too simplistic, for it does not adequately describe the

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complex, subtle and multi-faceted Bahá'í position, especially as it is developed by Bahá'u'lláh in such works as the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Indeed, the Bahá'í Faith continually frustrates such easy and simplistic classifications. For example, while Bahá'í theology might be described as liberal or even radical, its strict moral standards might be characterized by some as conservative or even puritanical. To continue, while the Bahá'í view does incorporate what might be seen as inclusivistic elements, these elements must be understood in their relationship with other well known Bahá'í principles such as: the concept of "the relativity of religious truth"; the admonition to foster and preserve "unity in diversity"; and the notion that the religions of the world are involved in a dynamic historical process -- what Bahá'ís refer to as "progressive revelation" (the last two principles will be discussed later in this chapter).

Modifications of the inclusivist position include perspectivist theories of religious pluralism, of which John Hick's theory, as he presents it in his recent book An Interpretation of Religion, is typical.12 Hick's perspectivism, as I understand it, is grounded on the Kantian distinction made between noumenon and phenomenon, between an entity an sich ("in itself") as unperceived by anyone,

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and an entity as perceived by us. Consequently, Hick makes a distinction between ultimate reality an sich and ultimate reality as experienced and perceived by different religious traditions.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 240ff.} Hick categorizes these varying perceptions into two broad categories: one is the Real (Hick's general term for the absolute) understood as a deity or god, and as having a divine persona (e.g. Yahweh, Shiva, Vishnu, Ahura Mazda, Alláh, God the Father, the Great Spirit, and so on) and the other is the Real understood as a non-personal Absolute, or as the ground of being, or as the animating force in the universe (e.g. the Daoist conception of the Dao, the Mahayana Buddhist conceptions of dharma, sunyata, or nirvana, the advaita Vedanta conception of Brahman or the Chinese understanding of Tien).

Armed with this distinction Hick contends that the various understandings of ultimate reality propounded by the religions of the world are not incommensurate views. Rather they are differing perspectives of the same reality. Accordingly, since reality is understood from a host of differing perspectives, we find among the world's religious traditions, a plurality of perceptions about reality. In summarizing his own position, Hick writes that "the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different respons-
es to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human ..."¹⁴

Having dealt with diverse understandings of ultimate reality, Hick proceeds to explain the apparent differences in metaphysical, cosmological and eschatological conceptions of the world's religions by viewing all such matters as within the domain of what he calls "myth, mystery and unanswered questions."¹⁵ For example, the doctrine of reincarnation, so essential to the religious traditions of India (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism), is conspicuously absent from the so-called western religions (e.g. Judaism, Christianity, Islám and Bahá'í). Hick accounts for this basic difference by noting that it is the literal understanding of reincarnation that divides these traditions. However, if reincarnation is understood as a powerful metaphor, as myth, the differences between these two great religious traditions collapses. In Hick's words

The doctrine of reincarnation is seen by some as a mythological way of making vivid the moral truth that our actions have inevitable future consequences for good or ill, this being brought home to the imagination

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¹⁵See Chapter 19 of An Interpretation of Religion.
by the thought that the agent will personally reap those consequences in a future earthly life.¹⁶

Hick makes similar arguments for the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. Hick contends that all such exclusive sounding religious doctrines are susceptible to being interpreted metaphorically. This being the case, all such apparent differences which arise from such exclusive sounding doctrines would collapse, according to Hick. The allure of such an approach is indeed appealing.

On all of these matters the Bahá'í concept of religious unity is essentially the same as Hick's. For this reason, the Bahá'í view is more appropriately characterized as perspectivist. Hick's perspectivism, as I understand it, appears to operate in only one direction -- from human beings to ultimate reality. The Bahá'í view, however, operates in both directions; that is, from human beings to the absolute and from the absolute to human beings. In other words, not only do human beings have different perspectives of God or ultimate reality; but according to the Bahá'í writings, God or ultimate reality also adapts the understanding of Itself to the varying cultures of the world. Thus, implicit in the Bahá'í principle of religious unity is the concept that religious truth is relative, that

¹⁶Ibid. p. 349. Hick cites a number of Buddhists who hold this view, including such notable scholars as Keiji Nishitani (note 9, p. 376).
divine revelation is uniquely suited and adapted to the age, culture, and stage of human development in which it appears. For example, in referring to the various religions of the world, Bahá'u'lláh asserts in two different passages that

... every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God. Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it hath appeared.¹⁷

That [the religions of the world] differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.¹⁸

Thus, the Bahá'í view of religious unity is perspectivism with a twist. The conventional meaning of perspectivism involves various responses to or perspectives of divinity made by the peoples and religious traditions of the world. However, Bahá'í perspectivism also entails the varying responses of divinity to humankind. In other words, a mutual process or hermeneutical circulation exists between religious communities and the divine; between the ever evolving perspectives of divinity and religious truths on the one hand, and

¹⁷Gleanings, p. 81, #34.
¹⁸Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 13.
the adaptation of those truths by that same source of divinity or ultimate reality to particular societies and traditions on the other. Bahá'í perspectivism incorporates a human-divine interaction that is similar to what Wilfred Cantwell Smith observes about religious communities the world over:

... each of these processes [Islámic, Christian, Buddhist, etc.] has been and continues to be a divine-human complex. To fail to see the human element in any would be absurd; to fail to see the divine element in any would ... be obtuse. (To fail to see the interrelatedness of all is, I suggest, old-fashioned.)

The Bahá'í approach to religious pluralism further parts ways with Hick over his assertion that the phenomena of religion, in all its worldwide diversity, is best understood from a family resemblance model, after the usage of Wittgenstein.\(^1\) In this conception of religion, there are no essential characteristics, no common principles that every religion must have; there is no collective essence, no essential core, no sure foundation upon which all religions either share, agree in principle, or are founded upon. Instead, according to Hick, there

\(\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\)Towards a World Theology, p. 34.

is a continuum of characteristics "distributed sporadically and in varying degrees which together distinguish" the family of religious traditions from other families such as political movements or philosophical schools of thought.\footnote{Ibid., p. 4.}

In contrast, the Bahá’í view asserts the very things that a family resemblance model would deny: namely, that there are certain essential characteristics that all religions share. In this view, the religions of the world are "as differing species of the same genus," to borrow an insightful analogy from Wilfred Cantwell Smith.\footnote{Towards a World Theology, p. 52.} For example, under the genus \textit{Felis} falls a wide variety of true cats, including both wild and domestic species. Despite differences in size, geographic distribution, and certain behaviors, all cats share in common a number of characteristic features such as their predatory behavior, carnivorous diet, overall physical appearance -- including that most cat-like of all features -- whiskers, and as any cat-lover well knows, an appealing aloofness. The world’s religious traditions are understood in a similar way. While the religions of the world vary greatly, they share, according to the Bahá’í view, certain fundamental features including their common origin and their emphasis on the ability of faith to profoundly transform an individual (see Chapter II for a complete discussion of these topics).
With the preceding analogy in mind, it should be clear that the Bahá’í principle of religious unity is best characterized as a type of perspectivism similar to the theory advocated by Hick. Bahá’í perspectivism, does not, however, incorporate, as Hick’s does, a family resemblance model. On the contrary, the Bahá’í view clearly holds that behind the seeming diversity of the world’s religions there exist certain unifying features which they all have in common. For this reason, as I have already argued in Chapter II, the Bahá’í view also shares certain similarities with the concept of the "transcendent unity of religions" which Frithjof Schuon so persuasively argues. The Bahá’í view is also similar to what Huston Smith terms the "primordial tradition," or what Aldous Huxley, after the coinage of Gottfried Leibniz, calls the "perennial philosophy". All of these views have in common the assertion that behind the seeming diversity of the world’s religious traditions lie both a common origin and certain universal truths. As Huxley presents it, "Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions."

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23 See Huston Smith’s article "Philosophy, Theology, and the Primordial Claim," Cross Currents, Vol. 38, no. 3 (Fall 1988), pp. 276-288 and Chapter III of his Beyond the Post-Modern Mind (New York: Crossroad, 1982). It is in the second work that Smith briefly discusses Huxley’s views as they are presented in his book The Perennial Philosophy.

In pulling together the various lines of my argument so far, it is readily apparent that the Bahá'í principle of religious unity is best characterized as a primordial or perennial philosophy which incorporates a perspectivist understanding of religious pluralism. This analysis is not complete, though, for the Bahá'í view also includes, as a basic component, an historical understanding of the world's religions. It is to this subject that I now turn.

The Bahá'í View and Historical Process

"The world is in flux, and we know it," affirms Wilfred Cantwell Smith in the beginning of his thought-provoking book The Meaning and End of Religion. It is in this work that he persuasively argues the importance of understanding religion from a dynamic historical context. "Like other aspects of human life," continues Smith, "the religious aspect too is seen to be historical, evolving, in process. For Smith, the religious traditions of the world have been involved in a dynamic process of historical change and mutual influence.

With the possible exception of Islám, the Bahá'í Faith may well be unique among the world's religious traditions in that it enthusiastically embraces the idea that religion must be understood historically. Indeed, within the Bahá'í corpus the religious traditions of the world are not seen as static and isolated

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p. 2.
events which sporadically appear. Rather, they are seen as participating in a progressive, dynamic and never-ending process. Smith echoes the Bahá’í view, when he argues that the religious traditions of the world should be seen as active "participants in the world history of religion." Not surprisingly, the Bahá’í conception of religious history is grounded in a process metaphysics. Indeed, in language reminiscent of that found in Henri Bergson’s Creative Evolution,27 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms that

Creation is the expression of motion. Motion is life. A moving object is a living object, whereas that which is motionless and inert is as dead. All created forms are progressive in their planes, or kingdoms of existence, under the stimulus of the power or spirit of life. The universal energy is dynamic. Nothing is stationary in the material world of outer phenomena or in the inner world of intellect and consciousness.28

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26Ibid., p. 20.

27Arthur Mitchell, trans. (1911; rpt. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983). I realize that the reference to Bergson thought is brief, however I mention his ideas in the hope that such a reference will call attention to an area that needs further study.

It follows directly from such an understanding of reality that the phenomena of religion would be subject to the same dynamic process. Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues

Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive. If it be without motion and nonprogressive, it is without the divine life; it is dead. The divine institutes are continuously active and evolutionary; therefore, the revelation of them must be progressive and continuous. All things are subject to reformation.29

'Abdu'l-Bahá likens this process to "the progression of the seasons of the year" with the beginning of each religion comparable to the beginning of spring.30 The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh often use the analogy of the rising and setting of the sun when explaining this same concept.31 The point of these and similar references, too numerous to mention, is this: the Bahá'í Faith regards the religions of the world as participants in a dynamic and progressively unfolding process,

29Ibid.


31The Báb, Persian Bayán 4:12, in Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 106 and Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Iqán, pp. 21-22, 160-161.
what Bahá’ís call "progressive revelation." This process both stimulates human civilization and keeps pace with it.

From what has been argued so far, it should come as no surprise that within the Bahá’í writings the religions of the world are regarded as participants in the successive unfoldment of the "ancient path of God" and that the Bahá’í Faith is only one of the most recent participants, and by its own admission, not the final participant. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi points out that the Bahá’í Faith recognizes the religions of the world "as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part."

The concept of progressive revelation provides the final ingredient for my analysis of the Bahá’í concept of religious unity. Since the religions of the world have been successively revealed to an ever advancing human civilization, many of the apparent differences between these religions are due to historical and

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32 For the specific occurrence of the phrases "progressive revelation," see Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, pp. 74-75, #31. In this same passage Bahá’u’lláh refers to the world’s religions as links in a "chain of successive revelations." In his book, Towards a World Theology, Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggests that the image of a flowing river may help communicate the dynamic and fluid process in which the world’s religions are involved (p. 26).

even cultural factors. In other words, they differ because the historical and cultural conditions have differed. Given this view, any discussion of religious pluralism would have to take the changing historical and cultural conditions into account. This is precisely what the Bahá'í Faith does.

The Bahá'í View: Process Perspectivism

In attempting to synthesize the various strands which make up the Bahá'í principle of religious unity, it becomes apparent that no existing label or categorization is adequate. The Bahá'í view combines elements of perspectivism, perennial philosophy, and historical process ("progressive revelation"). For these reasons, I have characterized the Bahá'í view of religious unity as "process perspectivism" due to its incorporation of such concepts as transcendental unity and perspectivism, and on its placement of the various religions within an unfolding and progressive historical process. It is my hope that coining such a new term will not lead to further confusion, but will instead avoid various misconceptions of the Bahá'í view which a simplistic use of the current terminology perpetuates.
CHAPTER IV

THE CHALLENGE OF RADICAL PLURALISM:

A POST-MODERN DEVELOPMENT

The greatest philosophical challenge to the Bahá’í principle of religious unity originates from the diverse group of current trends in philosophy and literary criticism that fall under the general heading of "post-modernism." Radical pluralism may be seen as one such trend in the post-modern movement.

Radical pluralism, as it applies to the study of religion, holds that even after one employs the kind of perspectivism advocated by the Bahá’í Faith, there remain "irreducible aspects," "mutually incommensurable insights" and stubbornly different doctrines and world views in every religious tradition that cannot simply be reduced to some "monolithic unity," intellectual abstraction, or ultimate reality.¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith expresses this sentiment well when he writes

I find the religious diversity of the world almost bewilderingly complex.

The more I study, the more variegated I find the religious scene to be. I have no reason to urge a thesis of unity among "the religions of the

world’. As a matter of fact, I do not find unity even within one so-called 'religion’, let alone among all.... It is not the case that all religions are the same. The historian notes that not even one religion is the same, century after century, or from one country to another, or from village to city.... I repeat: it is not the case that all religions are the same. Moreover, if a philosopher asks (anhistorically) what they all have in common, he or she either finds the answer to be 'nothing', or finds that they all have in common something so much less than each has separately as to distort or to evacuate the individual richness and depth and sometimes grotesqueness of actual religious life.

What Smith and others argue is that such differences are either largely ignored, viewed as relatively unimportant secondary or non-essential aspects; or worse, that such differences represent corrupt degenerations from some supposed pure or essential core of truth.

The Charge of Misinterpretation

Radical pluralists make at least three important criticisms against views which advocate a perennialist or primordial philosophy (usually some form of perspectivism or inclusivism based on the presumed existence of some ultimate

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perspectivism or inclusivism based on the presumed existence of some ultimate reality or transcendent unity). First, it is held that such views must misinterpret every religion in order to uncover some presumed unifying factor. Langdon Gilkey makes this point in his criticism of the general approach towards religious pluralism of Frithjof Schuon, Huston Smith, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter

[The single 'essence of religion' which this approach seeks] represents -- try as it may to avoid it -- a particular way of being religious... Thus it has to misinterpret every other tradition in order to incorporate them into its own scheme of understanding. In the end, therefore, it represents the same religious colonialism that Christianity used to practice so effectively: the interpretation of an alien viewpoint in terms of one's own religious center and so an incorporation of that viewpoint into our own system of understanding.³

In this process of misinterpretation, certain presumed truths or essential teachings are often extracted out of their cultural contexts and displayed as universal principles. Cultural anthropologist Michael Fischer makes an argument

typical of this type of criticism. Upon visiting the Bahá’í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, where he afterwards attended a Bahá’í prayer meeting featuring readings from various religious texts, Fischer observed that

This was, perhaps, the syncretism that the Bahá’í Faith claims to foster: when one becomes a Bahá’í, one does not reject one’s previous faith but adds to it, one learns to distinguish what is eternal morality and what are historically conditioned instruments of that morality. As an anthropologist, however, I was somewhat disappointed: what was read from each text destroyed the particularity of the tradition from which it was drawn, leaving, seemingly, but banal platitudes.⁴

A Bahá’í response to these very real and serious criticisms is two-fold. First, the Bahá’í writings frequently make a distinction between the admittedly high ideals of the Faith and the behavior of its adherents. For example, Shoghi Effendi suggests that the greatest test an individual Bahá’í ever encounters is from other Bahá’ís.⁵ Thus, while the observations that Fischer makes about a


particular Bahá'í prayer meeting are undoubtedly true -- for I have personally experienced similar situations -- his criticism is appropriately aimed at the behavior of individual Bahá'ís and not Bahá'í theology. Nowhere in the Bahá'í sacred writings is such activity either encouraged or condoned. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi even expressly denies that a list of fundamental teachings derived from the various religions can even be made.

The fundamentals of all Divinely-instituted religions cannot be rigidly classified. No definite or exhaustive list of them can be set up, as we have no means of ascertaining that what we consider to be those fundamentals are common to all religions.⁶

Be this as it may, individual Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í community as a whole need to take Fischer's criticism of their behavior to heart. With this in mind, I encourage the Bahá'í community to avoid the temptation of a "Bahá'í-centric" approach to the world's religions, which would include, among other things, ripping quotations out of their particular contexts.

Secondly, and more to the point, the criticism is made that in advocating a perspectivist view of the world's religions one must inevitably misinterpret

⁶From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 7/10/1939, in Hornby, Lights of Guidance, #1702.
them in order to fit their disparate doctrines and beliefs into some grand unity. Let me concede at the onset, that it is often the case that individuals misinterpret an alien culture or religion, often grossly so. While this is indeed a serious charge, it raises some important questions. First, it presumes that a correct interpretation exists or that it can only be made by the adherents of the particular tradition in question. This brings up the whole question of whom one can trust to give the definitive view, if such a view even exists? Secondly, religious diversity is not only a phenomenon which exists between the various religious traditions, it also exists within any one religious tradition, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has so convincingly shown in his provocative book *The Meaning and End of Religion*. This being the case, a perspectivist interpretation may be just as easily made outside of any particular tradition as it is made within. This raises an interesting question. If a Sikh interprets her own faith from a perspectivist standpoint, does she misinterpret it?

The sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith are very clear about its relationship with other religions. For instance, Shoghi Effendi in a powerfully worded statement, makes the Bahá'í position on other religions unambiguously clear:

The Faith standing identified with the name of Bahá'u'lláh disclaims any intention to belittle any of the Prophets gone before Him, to whittle down any of their teachings, to obscure, however slightly, the radiance of their
Revelations, to oust them from the hearts of their followers, to abrogate the fundamentals of their doctrines, to discard any of their revealed Books, or to suppress the legitimate aspirations of their adherents.7

Statements such as these clearly prohibit Bahá'ís from misinterpreting other religions, even in the name of promoting Bahá'í ideals or principles. Again, I can only repeat that the Bahá'í community must seriously heed such words and must actively avoid ethnocentric and superficial understandings of other religions. Taking his cue from the so-called golden rule, Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggests that: "In the comparative study of religion, I have found it a good rule to suggest for the interpretation of others' religious affairs only such theories and principles of interpretation as may be applicable, or at the least intelligible, for one's own case."8

Finally, there remains the contention that Bahá'í perspectivism will rob other religious traditions of their richness and unique differences. The Bahá'í principle of "unity in diversity" is relevant to this discussion. Briefly stated, the Bahá'í Faith, while advocating unity among diverse groups, seeks, through this

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7The Promised Day is Come (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), pp. 108. For similar references see The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 57-58, 114.

8Towards a World Theology, pp. 33-34.
principle, to protect, foster and even promote such diversity. In fact, members of the Bahá'í community seem to delight in the experience of encountering diversity -- in all its multifaceted forms. The challenge of this concept is to recognize unity where it truly exists, while respecting and appreciating diversity. Characteristically, Shoghi Effendi is very clear in his statement on the Bahá'í position on diversity:

[The Bahá'í Faith] does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race. It insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity...

'Abdu'l-Bahá, on the other hand, often employs the analogy of a beautiful flower garden in His explanations of this important principle. For example, He writes

\footnote{The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 41, underlining mine.}
Consider the flowers of a garden. Though differing in kind, color, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm and addeth unto their beauty. How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruit, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and color! Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas and convictions of the children of men.¹⁰

Passages such as these indicate the Bahá’í attitude towards diversity. The attitude is one where differences are not merely respected and promoted, but enjoyed as well. In summary, the Bahá’í view of religious unity nowhere

seeks to diminish either the uniqueness or even the particular views of any religious tradition or culture.

The Charge of Unnecessary Abstraction

Related to the first criticism of misinterpretation is one that challenges the abstract nature of perspectivist theories. Not even the most outspoken critics of religious perspectivism deny that it carries explanatory power. In fact, even Panikkar, one of Hick's many critics, admits that he is "prepared to believe that most of the discrepancies among religions are complimentary and supplementary views coming from a multiperspectival approach." Nor is there a problem with the general observation that religious share certain structural affinities. For example, all religions recognize some transcendent or ultimate reality, they all make a distinction between the sacred and the profane -- both in theory and in practice, and they all have rituals, holidays, myths and sacred narratives.

Nevertheless, as Panikkar points out

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Humankind is not a skeleton. As medicine is not anatomy, so religion is not a formal structure. It all depends on the flesh and life we put into these structures.\(^{12}\)

As I discussed in Chapter II, religion encompasses the lived experience of people whose lives are transformed by faith, and as Wilfred Cantwell Smith reminds us, this transformation can be for better or worse. Structural abstractions like those noted above seem far removed from the day to day and personal experiences of those who actually live their religion. It is also at this level that religion is clothed with particular doctrines that seem to defy any attempt to place them within a scheme of transcendent unity. There are two responses to this criticism: one of a more general nature, and one specific to the Bahá'í tradition.

First, the more general response. Frithjof Schuon grounds his argument for a "transcendent unity of religions" on the distinction between what he calls the "esoteric" and "exoteric" dimensions of religion.\(^{13}\) This distinction, as we shall soon see, takes away much of the force of this criticism. Schuon identifies the esoteric dimension as the inherently more mystical of the two. This level is

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 108.

\(^{13}\)The Transcendent Unity of Religions, pp. 7-60.
characterized by a monistic realization of an inclusive, absolute, undifferentiated unity or supreme identity which can only be spoken of through symbols and myths, allegories and metaphors. It is at the esoteric level that the concept of the unity of religions is realized. According to Schuon, while this realization is potentially available in any tradition or culture, only a small minority of people in any given tradition ever achieve it. In contrast, the exoteric dimension is concerned with doctrines and dogmas, outward forms, logical proofs and concrete images. The exoteric level is characterized by a monotheistic or dualistic exclusivism which recognizes, as correct, one concrete form or expression over others. At the exoteric level, for example, Islam is proclaimed to be the only true religion. It is at this level that the world’s religions are perceived to be both bewilderingly diverse and mutually exclusive.

Schuon sees the esoteric and exoteric dimensions as embodied in two distinct personality types found within all religious traditions, with the majority of religious adherents being exoteric. This is very similar to T. Patrick Burke’s discussion of the “popular” or “devotional” (exoteric) and “reflective” (esoteric) aspects of religion. Like Schuon, Burke argues that the reflective (esoteric) personality type has more in common with their counterparts in other religious traditions than they do within their own tradition. The same is true for the

\[^{14}\textit{Fragile Universe} \text{ (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), pp. 79-92.}\]
popular (exoteric) personality. In other words, these distinctions cut across religions traditions.

Schuon’s analysis of the esoteric and exoteric dimensions of religion provides for an unexpected point of agreement and unity between the religions of the world. Furthermore, while esoterics are admittedly a minority in any religious tradition, their faith is no less immediate or moving. Indeed, for esoterics, recognition of an all-embracing transcendent unity is not mere abstraction, but the core of their belief. Not surprisingly, Schuon holds that the esoteric dimension is the essential mystical core, without which, a religion would lose its very life blood.

Secondly, the principle of religious unity is, for Bahá’ís, no mere ethereal abstraction remote from the day to day experience of life. On the contrary, this is one of the most basic and fundamental of all Bahá’í beliefs. Even at the exoteric level, the principle of religious unity is one that every Bahá’í, the world over, cares deeply about. In fact, in many cases, this principle alone was the leading cause of their conversion to the Bahá’í Faith.

The Problem of Initial Assumptions

A third and more serious criticism arises from certain metaphysical considerations. According to this criticism, all theories which advocate religious
unity assume the existence of some ultimate reality, some privileged absolute which lurks behind the "rightly" interpreted cultural and historical manifestations of this supposed truth. Such theories seem to naively ignore the post-modern contention that all conceptions of the truth are hopelessly entangled in their respective linguistic, cultural and historical contexts. "The challenge in the 'post-modern' human condition," as Purusottama Bilimoria so aptly puts it, is the suggestion

that there is neither one "absolute" or "decisive" truth content (logos, presence) in religion (contrary to the exclusivist presupposition), nor a plurality of expressions or articulations inscripting the same deep truth-content (contrary to the inclusivists assumption). Indeed, it argues that all conceptions of truth are equally constructed artifacts, which have thus to be contextualised and understood in the horizons of disparate and possibly unique experiences, tradition and aspirations of each cultural group.  

An even more serious threat to religious perspectivism is raised by Panikkar. He argues against the perspectivist position which posits the existence of some ultimate truth seen through a plurality of perceptions. He advo-

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cates instead, the notion that truth itself is pluralistic. Obviously he does not hold "a plurality of truths" for he insists that this would be contradictory. Instead, Panikkar holds what he calls a non-dualist position which contends that reality is fundamentally irreducible to some ultimate unity or monism.

Obviously, whether an ultimate truth exists or not, or whether truth is unitary or pluralistic, are questions not open to being proven through the appeal to empirical evidence or conclusive arguments. Each view has gathered around it certain lines of reasoning which support its own perspective. It is clear to many that those who favor one view over the other do so not on the basis of any incontrovertible line of reasoning. Rather they do so on the basis of certain presuppositions that bias them in one direction or the other. As Huston Smith simply puts it, "Everything turns on which foot one comes down on." Consequently, this debate seems to be, at least, partly a matter of emphasis. To be more specific, on the one hand, for those who emphasize differences, diversity is granted a privileged position and any unitary features are seen as less important or superficial. On the other hand, for those who presuppose the existence of some underlying universal truth, unitary principles are given a privileged position while any differences that may be encountered are considered secondary or non-essential.

\[16^6\] Beyond the Post-Modern Mind (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 35.
As I understand Schuon, this debate may have less to do with philosophical issues and more to do with the tension that exists between esoteric and exoteric perspectives. If this is true, radical pluralism belongs more to the exoteric dimension, while views which advance religious unity belong more to the esoteric dimension. Since for Schuon, these two dimensions of religion represent deeply felt approaches to religious life, it is doubtful whether the debate between radical pluralism and perspectivist views will ever be resolved. In its favor, the Bahá'í concept of process perspectivism does have the advantage of fostering, at least among Bahá'ís, a deep appreciation and love for the world's religious traditions. Bahá'u'lláh even encourages His followers to "Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship." This attitude follows directly from the Bahá'í doctrine of religious unity, for the adherents of the world's religious traditions are one's brothers and sisters in an ancient and progressively unfolding process of which the Bahá'í Faith is only the most recent, and certainly not the last, development.

Resolving this issue is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead I will close with Huston Smith's conclusion from his own defense of primordialism (his defense of primordialism certainly applies to what I have called the process perspectivism of the Bahá'í Faith):

17Lawh-i-Dunya, in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 87.
Some thinkers are so occupied with these differences [among religious traditions] that they dismiss claims of commonality as simply sloppy thinking, yet identity within difference is as common an experience as life affords. Green is not blue, yet both are light. A gold watch is not a gold ring, but both are gold. Women are not men, but both are human....

... Blue is not red, but both are light. Exoterics can be likened to people who hold that light isn’t truly such, or at least that it is not light in its purest form, unless it is of a given hue. Meanwhile academicians have become so fearful that a hue will be overlooked or that some that are known will become victimized -- marginalized is the going word -- that they deny the existence of light itself. There is nothing that hues instance and embody; nothing, in deconstructionist language, that texts signify. All that exists is an endless stream of signifiers.

The primordialist believes there is such a thing as light in itself -- pure white light that summarizes all the wave-lengths -- and that it is the Light of the World.¹

Smith's closing sentence echoes the words of Bahá'u'lláh when, in referring to the religions of the world, He writes "These principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are rays of one Light."

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The Bahá’í concept of religious unity is unique in the history of religion. Not only is it one of the most fundamental doctrines of the Bahá’í Faith, but more importantly, its direct and primary basis is found within its own sacred writings as opposed to commentaries on such writings. This doctrine affirms the existence of a common transcendent source from which the world’s religious traditions originate and receive their inspiration. The Bahá’í writings view the religions of the world not as isolated and sporadic events, but as participants in a successively unfolding process called progressive revelation. The religious traditions of the world, from the most ancient to recent, have been initiated by countless manifestations.

The Bahá’í view is remarkably similar to the thought of Frithjof Schuon, who argues for what he terms the "transcendent unity of religions" which lies at the heart of every religious tradition. The Bahá’í principle of religious unity does not claim that all the religions are the same. Instead it claims that they all share certain fundamental and essential features which are distinguished from other nonessential aspects related to the historical, cultural and linguistic context in which each religious tradition develops.
In addition to the recognition of a transcendental unity of religions, the Bahá'í writings also emphasize the process of personal transformation brought about through faith as a unifying factor in all religious traditions. The Bahá'í scriptures make a distinction between institutionalized religion, which involves ritual performance, traditional practice, and accumulated doctrine, and faith -- that deeply personal attitude, feeling and inward response of an individual to the transcendent.

Apparent differences between the different religions are explained by the Bahá'í view through a perspectivist approach grounded in a process metaphysics. The Bahá'í principle of religious unity does not conveniently fit into any one of the standard categories proposed for dealing with the problem of religious pluralism. Therefore, I have characterized the Bahá'í view as "process perspectivism" due to its incorporation of such concepts as transcendental unity (primordialism) and perspectivism, and on its placement of the various religions within an unfolding and progressive historical process.

Radical pluralism is the greatest philosophical challenge to the Bahá'í principle of religious unity. According to this school of thought, truth is pluralistic and is therefore not reducible to some common essence. Therefore, no amount of perspectivist thinking can fully account for the incredible diversity exhibited by the world's religions. Furthermore, charge the radical pluralists, perspectivist
theories are guilty of misinterpreting every religion in order to uncover points of unity. However, neither radical pluralism nor perspectivism can be conclusively proven. Choosing between these two schools of thought seems to be largely determined by one's initial presuppositions.
APPENDIX A

SOME SIMILARITIES BETWEEN ISLÁM AND THE BAHÁ’Í FAITH
THE FIVE PILLARS (ARKAN AD-DÍN) IN ISLÁM AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

ISLÁM

1. **Shahadah** (Ar. from the verb shahida, "to observe," "to testify," "to witness"): The act of witnessing or attesting to the formula or creed (kalíma): "There is no god but the God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

2. **Salah** (Ar., "ritual prayer" or "worship"; Per. salat): All Muslims are expected to pray five times a day, at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and late evening. Before each prayer a Muslim performs wudu, ablutions (the ritual washing of the face hands and feet). Believers turn to face Mecca during prayer.

3. **Zakah** (Ar. lit. "purification," Per. zakat): All Muslims are required to give part of their wealth (almsgiving) for those in need and to further the cause of Islám. It is a mandatory minimum tax (2.5% of a Muslim's gathered and dispensed under the auspices of the Islámic state.

4. **Sawm** (Ar. "fasting"): All Muslims are expected to abstain from food, drink, smoking, and sexual relations during the daylight hours of the entire month of Ramadan (28 days). Ramadan commemorates the month when Muhammad first began to receive revelation from Allah. Three days of celebration follow this month of fasting.

5. **Hajj** (Ar. "pilgrimage"): Every Muslim who is financially able is required to make a pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina once during their lifetime.

BAHÁ'Í

1. There is no formalized creed, however, every Bahá'í is expected to affirm the absolute oneness of God and that Bahá'u'lláh is one of God's Manifestations.

2. **Obligatory Prayers** (Ar. salah, Per. salat): "the believer is entirely free to choose any one of these three [obligatory] prayers, but is under the obligation of reciting either one of them" (Bahá'í Prayers 3). During the performance of the "Long Obligatory Prayer," the believer is asked to perform ablutions. As in Islám, the believer must turn towards the qiblíh ("point of adoration," for Bahá'ís, the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh).

3. **Huququ'llah** (Ar., lit. "the right of God"): All Bahá'ís are expected to give part of their income (approximately 19% after necessary expenses are deducted) for the promotion of the Faith and for charitable purposes.

4. **Sawm** (Ar. "fasting," Per. rozah): All Bahá'ís over the age of fifteen are expected to abstain from food and drink during the daylight hours of the entire month of 'Ala (March 2-20). Four days of celebration (Ayám-i-Há) precede this period of fasting while the festival of Naw-Rúz concludes it.

5. **Hájí**: Every Bahá'í who is financially able is required to make a pilgrimage (once during their lifetime) to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh (Akka, Israel), the house of the Báb (Shiraz, Iran), and the house of Bahá'u'lláh (Baghdad, Iraq).
SIMILAR LAWS IN ISLÁM AND THE BAHÁ’Í FAITH

Honor Your Parents
1. Worship God, and join not aught with Him in worship. Be good to parents, and to kindred, and to orphans, and to the poor, and to a neighbour, whether kinsman or newcomer, and to a fellow traveller, and to the wayfarer ... (Qur’án 4:40)

Adultery
2. Have naught to do with adultery; for it is a foul thing and an evil way ... (Qur’án 17:34)

Stealing
3. He who claims what is not his is not of us. Let him take his place in the fire. (Hadith of Muslim, qtd. in Husain 1967, 115)

Backbiting and Slander
4. And spy not on each other, nor speak ill of each other behind their backs. (Qur’án 49:12)

Whenever you speak, speak what is true. (Hadith of Bukhari, qtd. in Husain 1967, 103)

Intoxicants Forbidden
5. All intoxicants are forbidden. (Hadith of Bukhari and Muslim, qtd. in Husain 1967, 109)

Honor Your Parents
1. Say, O My people! Show honour to your parents and pay homage to them. This will cause blessings to descend upon you from the clouds of the bounty of your Lord, the Exalted, the Great. (Bahá’u’lláh, Family Life, #7)

Adultery
2. Ye have been forbidden to commit murder or adultery, or to engage in backbiting or calumny; shun ye, then what hath been prohibited in the holy Books and Tablets. (Bahá’u’lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 26 #19)

Stealing
3. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas (the Bahá’í book of laws) expressly prohibits stealing, lying, murder, adultery, and so on.

Backbiting and Slander
4. That seeker should also regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul. (Bahá’u’lláh, Kitáb-i-Iqán, p. 193)

Intoxicants Forbidden
5. Become ye intoxicated with the wine of the love of God, and not with that which deadeneth your minds ... Verily, it hath been forbidden unto every believer, whether man or woman. (Bahá’u’lláh, qtd. in Effendi, 1966, p. 27)
Tawhid (Ar.): The central concept around which all Islamic teachings revolve, is the absolute unity or oneness of God. God, is an utterly unique, absolute Reality, with no peer or likeness.

1. This is, indeed, the essence of all truth; No deity is there, except God. And it is to God alone Who is Exalted, Wise! (Qur'an 3:62)

2. SAY: God is One, the Ultimate Source, He does not give birth, nor was He born (of anyone) and there is nothing comparable to Him. (Qur'an 112:1-4; This surah is entitled "At-Tawhid," "the Unity," and it has been called the essence of the Qur'an)

3. SAY: Praise be to God and peace be on His servants whom He hath chosen! Is God the more worthy or the gods they join with Him? Is not He who hath made the Heavens and the Earth, and hath sent down rain to you from Heaven, by which we cause the luxuriant groves to spring up? It is not in your power to cause its trees to spring up! What! A god with God? Yet they find equals for Him! Is not He, who hath set the earth so firm, and hath made rivers in its midst, and hath placed mountains upon it, and put a barrier between the two seas? What! a god with God? Yet the greater part of them have no Knowledge! Is not He the more worthy who answereth the oppressed when they cry to him, and taketh off their ills, and maketh you to succeed your sires on the earth? What! a god with God? How few bear these things in mind! (Qur'an 27:61-63)

4. Regard thou the one true God as One Who is apart from, and immeasurably exalted above, all created things. The whole universe reflecteth His glory, while He is Himself independent of, and transcendeth His creatures. This is the true meaning of Divine unity. He Who is the Eternal Truth is the one Power Who exerciseth undisputed sovereignty over the world of being, Whose Image is reflected in the mirror of the entire creation. All existence is dependent upon Him, and from Him is derived the source of the sustenance of all things. This is what is meant by Divine unity; this is its fundamental principle. (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, p. 166, #84)

2. He is a true believer in Divine unity who, far from confusing duality with oneness, refuseth to allow any notion of multiplicity to becloud his conception of the singleness of God, who will regard the Divine Being as One Who, by His very nature, transcendeth the limitations of numbers. (Ibid., p. 166-167, #84)

3. Beware, beware, lest thou be led to join partners with the Lord, thy God. He is, and hath from everlasting been, one and alone, without peer or equal, eternal in the past, eternal in the future, detached from all things, ever-abiding, unchangeable, and self-subsisting. (Ibid., p. 192, #94)
THE UNKNOWABLENESS OF GOD IN ISLÁM AND THE BAHÁ’Í FAITH

ISLÁM

1. If all the shrubs on earth were mobilized for pens and all the oceans, refilled seven times, were used for ink, the Glory of God could not be inscribed, for God doth surpass all wisdom. (Qur’án 31:27, see also Qur’án 18:109)

2. Glory be to Him! And high let Him be exalted above that which they attribute to Him! Sole maker of the Heavens and of the Earth! How, when He hath no consort, should He have a son? He hath created everything, and He knoweth everything! This is your Lord. There is no God but He, the creator of all things: therefore worship Him alone; and He watcheth over all things: and He is the Subtle, the All-Informed. (Qur’án 6:100-103)

3. Glory be to Him and His supremacy! Far, far above is He from their conjectures! (Qur’án 17:43)

4. He knows what is hidden and what is open: too high is He for the partners they attribute to Him! (Qur’án 23:92, see also Qur’án 16:1)

5. But far be the Lord of the Heavens and of the Earth, the Lord of the Throne, from that which they impute to Him! (Qur’án 43:82, see also Qur’án 37:180)

6. Make no comparisons, therefore, with God. Verily, God hath knowledge, but ye have not. (Qur’án 16:76)

BAHÁ’Í

1. He, in truth, hath, throughout eternity, been one in His Essence, one in His attributes, one in His works. Any and every comparison is applicable only to His creatures, and all conceptions of association are conceptions that belong solely to those that serve Him. Immeasurably exalted is His Essence above the descriptions of His creatures. He, alone, occupieth the Seat of transcendent majesty, of supreme and inaccessible glory. The birds of men’s hearts, however high they soar, can never hope to attain the heights of His unknowable Essence. (Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, p. 193, #94)

2. Behold, how immeasurably exalted is the Lord your God above all created things! Witness the majesty of His sovereignty, His ascendancy, and supreme power. (Ibid., p. 184, #93)

3. Immeasurably exalted is He above the strivings of human mind to grasp His Essence, or of human tongue to describe His mystery. No tie of direct intercourse can ever bind Him to the things He hath created, nor can the most abstruse and most remote allusions of His creatures do justice to His being. Through His world-pervading Will He hath brought into being all created things. He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His own exalted and indivisible Essence, and will everlastingly continue to remain concealed in His inaccessible majesty and glory. (Ibid., p. 318, #148)
APPENDIX B

PROPHETS AND FOUNDERS OF RELIGION MENTIONED IN THE BAHÁ’Í WRITINGS
APPENDIX B:

PROPHETS AND FOUNDERS OF RELIGION MENTIONED IN THE BAHÁ’Í WRITINGS

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Legend: Name = mentioned in the Bahá'í writings (32 Prophets) Name = mentioned in the Qur'án, but not in the Bahá'í writings (5 Prophets)
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