

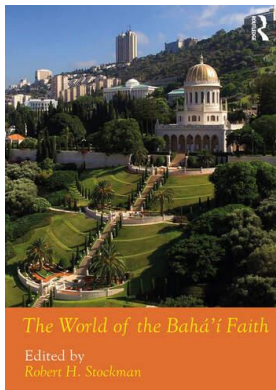
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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Progressive Revelation

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PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

Sasha Dehghani

Introduction

Progressive revelation is the pivotal concept underlying the fundamental Bahá'í principle of the oneness of religion. It gives an account of how God enters into human history and makes His will known to humanity, how the religions have come into being, and how they are related to each other, as well as why they have both similarities and differences. Most importantly, it explains why, in spite of the differences, the diverse religions of the world are in essence one. Bahá'ís believe that recognition of that fact will lead to reconciliation among the religions and dissolve the pretexts for hatred, prejudice, and division on religious grounds.

Since direct knowledge of God is impossible, periodically God sends a messenger—a Prophet or 'Manifestation of God'—with a revelation to guide humanity. These Manifestations of God have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh. The purpose of these revelations is twofold. At the individual level, it is to enable each soul to

advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed. It is for this very purpose that in every age and dispensation the Prophets of God and His chosen Ones have appeared amongst men.

(Gleanings 27.5)

At the societal level, the teachings and laws become the foundation of a civilization and move forward the historical process of human social development, referred to in the Bahá'í texts as 'an ever-advancing civilization' (*Gleanings* 109.2).

Progressive revelation can thus be seen as a developmental process of collective spiritual and social evolution. Just as the individual human being moves through a series of stages from infancy to maturity, in which the physical, intellectual, and moral potentialities of the person are gradually realized, humanity as a whole is seen to progress through stages of spiritual, moral, and social evolution as it responds to the revelation brought by the Manifestation of God in each age, or 'dispensation'. As in the process of individual development, the needs of humanity at each stage of its collective spiritual and social development are different, depending on the measures

required to effect the transformation of human consciousness to the next, more complex level of maturation, given its present state and the conditions of the time. As Bahá'u'lláh explains:

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. God's purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established.

The Prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity.

(*Gleanings* 34.5)

Aspects of revelation

Each revelation has two aspects. The core aspects of religion are universally valid constants that do not change and are reaffirmed in each revelation. These teachings are identifiable as the similarities and shared concepts that link the religions—foremost of which is the universal ethical maxim of the 'Golden Rule'. As the Universal House of Justice has stated:

The teaching that we should treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated, an ethic variously repeated in all the great religions, lends force to this latter observation in two particular respects: it sums up the moral attitude, the peace-inducing aspect, extending through these religions irrespective of their place or time of origin; it also signifies an aspect of unity which is their essential virtue, a virtue mankind in its disjointed view of history has failed to appreciate.

(1985: 19)

In one of His talks on this subject, 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies the 'basic foundation of the religion of God' as 'the principle of love, unity and the fellowship of humanity' (*Promulgation*, 443). In another talk, He states that the 'fundamentals of religion are intended to unify and bind together; their purpose is universal, everlasting peace' (*Promulgation*, 97). Specifically, He points out that the ethical monotheism of the Hebrew Bible was confirmed in succeeding religious dispensations:

The essential teaching of Moses was the law of Sinai, the Ten Commandments. Christ renewed and again revealed the commands of the one God and precepts of human action. In Muḥammad, although the circle was wider, the intention of His teaching was likewise to uplift and unify humanity in the knowledge of the one God. In the Báb the circle was again very much enlarged, but the essential teaching was the same.

(*Promulgation* 154)

Recognition of the oneness of God and His authority and the specific prohibitions on murder, theft, and dishonesty; respect for parents; and marital fidelity are essential foundations of every stable human society, and their abrogation would be inconceivable. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes that

The underlying foundation of the religions is one; there is no intrinsic difference between them. Therefore, if the essential and fundamental ordinances of the religions be observed, peace and unity will dawn, and all the differences of sects and denominations will disappear.

(*Promulgation* 99)

Yet each religion also has teachings and practices which differ from those of other religions. The Bahá'í writings give two reasons for such differences. First, the 'outer' aspect of religion (as distinct from the spiritual 'core') concerns laws dealing with human social relationships and practices such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and burial, as well as such matters as dietary laws and forms of worship, dress, etc. These social laws are not eternally fixed but can change from one dispensation to another. This principle is explained by Bahá'u'lláh in a tablet addressed to Mánikchí Şáhib, a Parsi Zoroastrian, in which He says that

Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require. Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.

(*Gleanings* 106.1)

Some social teachings are changed in order to meet the requirements of the current stage in the dynamic civilizational process, through which humanity has achieved increasingly complex and comprehensive forms of organizational units. Shoghi Effendi addresses this interrelationship between progressive revelation and the social advancement of humanity as follows:

Just as the organic evolution of mankind has been slow and gradual, and involved successively the unification of the family, the tribe, the city-state, and the nation, so has the light vouchsafed by the Revelation of God, at various stages in the evolution of religion, and reflected in the successive Dispensations of the past, been slow and progressive. Indeed the measure of Divine Revelation, in every age, has been adapted to, and commensurate with, the degree of social progress achieved in that age by a constantly evolving humanity.

(*Promised Day Is Come* 193–4)

The other reason for the differences between religions, according to the Bahá'í writings, is to be found in various forms of human error and intervention. Bahá'u'lláh explains:

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. All of them, *except a few which are the outcome of human perversity*, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose. Arise and, armed with the power of faith, shatter to pieces the gods of your vain imaginings, the sowers of dissension amongst you. Cleave unto that which draweth you together and uniteth you.

(*Gleanings* 111.1; emphasis added)

This form of difference is also the reason for the introduction of superstitions and human doctrines that create division and disunity within religions as well as hostility and conflict between them. In a talk given in 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said:

In brief, every one of the divine religions contains essential ordinances, which are not subject to change, and material ordinances, which are abrogated according to the exigencies of time. But the people of the world have forsaken the divine teachings and followed forms and imitations of the truth. Inasmuch as these human interpretations and superstitions differ, dissensions and bigotry have arisen, and strife and warfare have prevailed. By investigating the truth or foundation of reality underlying their own and other beliefs, all would be united and agreed, for this reality is one; it is not multiple and not divisible.
(*Promulgation* 106)

Opposition to new religions

According to the Bahá’í writings, human intervention is also the reason for a recurring historical phenomenon: despite the messianic promises in the sacred books, when the promised one does appear, He is rejected by most of the people as an impostor. This theme is addressed at length in Bahá’u’lláh’s foremost doctrinal work, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, written in response to the questions of an uncle of the Báb who had not yet accepted his nephew’s claim to be the Qa’im, the Promised One of Shi’i Islam. Bahá’u’lláh begins by posing the question: ‘Why is it that the advent of every true Manifestation of God hath been accompanied by such strife and tumult, by such tyranny and upheaval?’ He notes that the Prophets

have invariably foretold the coming of yet another Prophet after them, and have established such signs as would herald the advent of the future Dispensation. . . . Why then is it that despite the expectation of men in their quest of the Manifestations of Holiness, and in spite of the signs recorded in the sacred books, such acts of violence, of oppression and cruelty, should have been perpetrated in every age and cycle against all the Prophets and chosen Ones of God?

He gives two reasons. The first is blind obedience to the religious authorities of the time and failure to think for oneself without bias:

Unto every discerning observer it is evident and manifest that had these people in the days of each of the Manifestations of the Sun of Truth sanctified their eyes, their ears, and their hearts from whatever they had seen, heard, and felt, they surely would not have been deprived of beholding the beauty of God, nor strayed far from the habitations of glory. But having weighed the testimony of God by the standard of their own knowledge, gleaned from the teachings of the leaders of their faith, and found it at variance with their limited understanding, they arose to perpetrate such unseemly acts.
(*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 13–15)

The second is the obstructionism of the clerical establishment of the time. He places the responsibility on the leaders of religion, whose power and authority are inevitably threatened by the coming of a bearer of divine authority to whom they would have to defer:

Leaders of religion, in every age, have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp.

Some for the lust of leadership, others through want of knowledge and understanding, have been the cause of the deprivation of the people. By their sanction and authority, every Prophet of God hath drunk from the chalice of sacrifice, and winged His flight unto the heights of glory.

(Kitáb-i-Íqán 15)

Bahá'ís view this phenomenon as the source of religious doctrines of 'finality'—i.e., that divine revelation is limited to a single event or that it ends with the Prophet-Founder of a particular religion.

Followers of each religion have tended to allow their devotion to its Founder to cause them to perceive His Revelation as the final Word of God and to deny the possibility of the appearance of any subsequent Prophet. This has been the case of Judaism, Christianity and Islám. Bahá'u'lláh denies the validity of this concept of finality both in relation to past Dispensations and to His own.

(Kitáb-i-Aqdas, n. 180)

As Reuven Firestone, a scholar of Jewish and Islamic studies, has observed, the emergence of a new religion is always perceived as a threat by the established religion. Emerging from the existing tradition as a reform movement, its message is a critical one, particularly of the leadership. As the established religion can never really tolerate new religions, 'They inevitably attempt to do away with them' (cited in Dehghani 2014: 21).

Bernard Lewis has also suggested that similarity between an established religion and a new religion may be a factor in creating rivalry between the religions. He states that the monotheistic religions are generally able to tolerate their predecessor faiths (with notable exceptions), but the same benevolence does not apply to the faiths that succeed them. As he points out, Judaism perceived Christianity as a threat, while Christianity was able to incorporate and endorse aspects of Jewish reality, although it adamantly rejected Islam. In its turn, Islam tolerated the 'religions of the Book' (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians) but not—as Lewis notes—the post-Islamic religions such as the Bahá'í Faith. He concludes that established religions fear new religions and that fear motivates them to discriminate against and even persecute the new faith (ibid).

Progressive revelation within the ministry of a divine Manifestation

Progressive revelation also operates in other ways. For example, it also applies within the ministry of the Manifestation, in the unfolding process and major stages of Bahá'u'lláh's own ministry. Bahá'u'lláh states:

Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity. Consider the sun. How feeble its rays the moment it appeareth above the horizon. How gradually its warmth and potency increase as it approacheth its zenith, enabling meanwhile all created things to adapt themselves to the growing intensity of its light. How steadily it declineth until it reacheth its setting point. Were it, all of a sudden, to manifest the energies latent within it, it would, no doubt, cause injury to all created things. . . . In like manner, if the Sun of Truth were suddenly to reveal, at the earliest stages of its manifestation, the full measure of the potencies which the providence of the Almighty hath bestowed upon it, the earth of human understanding would waste away and be

consumed; for men's hearts would neither sustain the intensity of its revelation, nor be able to mirror forth the radiance of its light.

(*Gleanings* 38.1)

Shoghi Effendi applies the image of the sun and its gradual movement to the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh: 'With the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh draws to a close a period which, in many ways, is unparalleled in the world's religious history. . . . An epoch', he says, that was

characterized . . . by half a century of continuous and progressive Revelation, had terminated. . . . The Sun of Truth, the world's greatest Luminary, had risen in the Siyáh-Chál of Tīhrán, had broken through the clouds which enveloped it in Baghdád, had suffered a momentary eclipse whilst mounting to its zenith in Adrianople and had set finally in 'Akká, never to reappear ere the lapse of a full millennium.

(*God Passes By* 223)

Following the logic of a gradual and progressive unfoldment of revelation, Shoghi Effendi divides the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh into three major stages, each of which is realized in a specific locality. The first stage is the initiation of His ministry through His awakening vision in the dungeon of Tehran; the second stage is the declaration of His ministry: i.e., the moment when His redemptive claim as the expected Messianic figure was communicated to a small circle of family members and adherents at the end of His ten-year stay in Baghdad; and the third stage is the proclamation of His message, now universally and collectively, to the religious and political leaders of the world in the late Adrianople period. Bahá'u'lláh Himself confirms in a tablet the threefold stages of His revelation by stating that His message was first addressed to the people of mystical insight (*vujúhu'l-'urafá*), 'hereafter' to the learned and ecclesiastics (*thumma al-'ulamá*), and 'then' to the kings and rulers of the world (*thumma al-mulúk va's-saláṭín*) (*Ishráqát*, 260). According to Shoghi Effendi, the earliest period of Bahá'u'lláh's banishment to 'Akká, in which the Súriy-i-Haykal and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas were revealed, can be considered as the 'sequel to the proclamation' (*God Passes By* 205), whereas the later part of the 'Akká period, in which the Kitáb-i-'Ahd (Book of the Covenant) was penned, can be compared to the gradual setting of the sun.

With the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, a new process was initiated, that of the gradual implementation of the new laws and the materialization of the central covenantal institutions of the dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, connecting the heroic age of the faith, via a formative age, to a future stage of mankind's collective maturity and the 'Golden Age' anticipated in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

Linear and cyclical time

The principle of progressive revelation has not only religious and social implications but also philosophical significance. The twofold aspect of the core eternal verities and the outer, temporal teachings suggests that the Bahá'í notion of time combines both linear and cyclical motion. On the one hand, different divine Manifestations appear and reaffirm the core teachings. This aspect is clearly cyclical since these eternal verities, as constants, do not evolve but return with each cycle. In contrast, the teachings differ from dispensation to dispensation in order to respond to the needs of the time. This aspect is linear as humanity is always moving towards its telos of a peaceful and unified, 'ever-advancing' global civilization. Progressive revelation, therefore, seems to combine these two aspects of time, which could be visualized by the pattern of a sine wave or the shape of a three-dimensional spiral.

This twofold aspect of time can also be explained by likening the phenomenon of religion to the unfoldment of a year. A year moves through the cyclic progression of seasons, and the conclusion of one year is followed by the commencement of a new one, in which linear time moves forward but the eternal cycle of seasons is repeated. The organic life cycle of the earth is revived in spring by the life-giving warmth of the sun: blossoms appear once again, in summer the fruit matures and is gathered, and then the seasons of autumnal decline and wintry death set in, until the cycle is repeated with the coming of a new spring. While it seems to the outer eye that the same flowers, leaves, and fruits of the previous year have reappeared, in reality none of these have ever existed before. Factually, their appearance is unique. Applying this model to religion, each new dispensation also unfolds through a sequence of two ascending and two descending seasons, experiencing the spring of birth and summer of a 'Golden Age' when the material, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of civilization reach their zenith. But eventually, the civilization enters an autumn of decline, followed by a winter of stagnation. At this point, the cycle begins again, with a new divine revelation.

Progressivity and abrogation in other religions

Another term Shoghi Effendi used to describe progressive revelation is 'the relativity of religious truth'. Describing the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, he states that it

asserts the relativity of religious truth and the continuity of Divine Revelation; affirms the unity of the Prophets, the universality of their Message, the identity of their fundamental teachings, the sanctity of their scriptures, and the twofold character of their stations.

(God Passes By 137)

At other times, he refers to 'the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final'. It is clear from the context of all the statements in which he uses this terminology that he is referring to progressive revelation: i.e., to the social teachings that are relative because, although they derive authority from the Will of God, they are applicable to a specific period in the cycle of time described earlier—the dispensation in which they are promulgated. Unlike the core eternal spiritual truths, they are not 'absolute' as once the dispensation ends with the 'spring' of a new revelation, they are subject to abrogation.

The principle of progressive revelation is explained in the Bahá'í writings as a paradigm-changing concept that is not found in the same way in other sacred texts. Yet the basic idea was present, if only implicitly, in the scriptures of earlier religions, which used concepts such as 'return' and 'resurrection' to express the continuity of revelation and 'abrogation' to explain change in religious law over time. Such ideas are also found in religions beyond those of the Abrahamic tradition: for example, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

I come, and go, and come. When Righteousness
Declines, O Bharata! When Wickedness
Is strong, I rise, from age to age, and take
Visible shape, and move a man with men,
Succouring the good, thrusting the evil back,
And setting Virtue on her seat again.

(Arnold trans. 1886, chap. 4)

An early explanation of the progressiveness of revelation, the relativity of religious truth, and the abrogation of religious law is found in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, in which he explains why Christ changed certain laws of the Old Testament. Addressing those who did not embrace the idea of progress in the sphere of revelation, he wrote:

Such is the case with those who cannot endure to hear that something was lawful for righteous men in former times that is not so now; or that God, for certain temporal reasons, commanded then one thing to them and another now to these: yet both would be serving the same righteous will. These people should see that in one man, one day, and one house, different things are fit for different members; and a thing that was formerly lawful may become, after a time, unlawful—and something allowed or commanded in one place that is justly prohibited and punished in another. Is justice, then, variable and changeable? No, but the times over which she presides are not all alike because they are different times. But men, whose days upon the earth are few, cannot by their own perception harmonize the causes of former ages and other nations, of which they had no experience, and compare them with these of which they do have experience; although in one and the same body, or day, or family, they can readily see that what is suitable for each member, season, part, and person may differ. To the one they take exception; to the other they submit.

(3:7)

Augustine was, of course, not the first or the last to reflect on the renewal of the divine covenant and its implications. In the Book of Hebrews, Jesus is described as the ‘mediator’ of a new covenant: ‘In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old’ (8:13). The Pauline letters, such as Ephesians 2:15, address this point as well. And at the heart of Stephen’s forceful apology, recorded in Acts 6–7, we can discern the idea of a continuous chain of salvation figures. Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian era, was eager to prove that the biblical God operated through figures such as Abraham, Joseph the son of Jacob, Moses, and David, who time and again overcame opposition.

A Christian theologian who tried to break through the barricades of exclusivism and finality to create space for a more tolerant view of salvation history was Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), a Swedish archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize winner. A key figure in the Christian ecumenical movement, Söderblom also believed that religious truth could be found outside the Christian tradition. God’s existence, he said, can be proven through His ‘continuous revelation’ (1966: 338) to mankind: for example, through the appearance of religious geniuses. Although he believed that humanity could receive divine guidance outside the Christian tradition, Christ, to Söderblom, was still the most significant theophany and Western civilization the only one to understand the idea of progress (*ibid*: 363).

The concept of abrogation (*naskh*), as discussed in the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition, takes revelation to be subject to a process of change. Although treated in a controversial manner, abrogation was seen to apply in two ways: within the ministry of the Prophet as well as with respect to the ordinances of preceding religions. Certain statements by the Prophet Muhammad were abrogated at a later stage of His ministry, while the Qur’an itself abrogated ordinances in the earlier sacred texts. In this context, reference is often made to Qur’an 2:106: ‘Such of Our revelation (*āyah*) as we abrogated or cause to be forgotten, We bring (in its place) one better or the like thereof’ (cited in Hasan 1965: 189). This ‘external’ or inter-dispensational mode of abrogation, to which Augustine also refers, is confirmed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: ‘Now, this change, alteration, and abrogation was due to the fact that the age of Christ could not be compared to

that of Moses. The conditions and requirements had entirely changed, and the former commandments were therefore abrogated' (*Some Answered Questions*, chap. 20).

Ibn 'Arabí (1165–1240) writes regarding the historical unfoldment of religion, the unity of the Prophets, and the notion of abrogation:

But the prophets, in spite of their great number and the long periods of time which separate them, had no disagreement in knowledge of God, since they took it from God. So also are the Folk and Elect of Allah: The later ones affirm the truthfulness of the earlier ones, and each supports the others. . . . 'To every one [of the prophets] We have appointed a Law and a way' (5:48), that is, We have set down designated practices [*a 'māl*]. The periods of applicability of the practices can come to an end, and this is called 'abrogation' (*naskh*) in the words of the learned masters of the Shari'a. There is no single practice found in each and every prophecy, only the performance of the religion, coming together in it, and the statement of *tawhíd* .

(cited in Chittick 1989: 170–171)

In his *Fuṣūṣu'l-Hikam*, he further explains how a series of prophetic figures followed each other. All of them appeared sequentially, one could say in the same way as pearls are strung on a necklace. They are all alike, and yet each one is the bearer of a unique message and manifests a distinct divine name (Hourani 1997: 226). The Prophets, starting with Adam and ending with Muhammad, represent the divine logos and 'what is meant by "logos" throughout this work is the very prophet in question in respect of his particularities and the allotment determined for him and for his community by God' (Chittick 1982: 34).

Referring to the appearance of the Prophets as dispensational founding figures, Ibn 'Arabí addresses the paradox of unity and diversity, oneness and distinctness. Bahá'u'lláh, in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, explains the same paradox through another analogy to natural phenomena:

Consider the sun. Were it to say now, 'I am the sun of yesterday,' it would speak the truth. And should it, bearing the sequence of time in mind, claim to be other than that sun, it still would speak the truth. In like manner, if it be said that all the days are but one and the same, it is correct and true. And if it be said, with respect to their particular names and designations, that they differ, that again is true. For though they are the same, yet one doth recognize in each a separate designation, a specific attribute, a particular character.

(*Gleanings* 13.6)

The Qur'an not only suggests an ongoing sequence and chain of prophetic figures appearing in history and experiencing rejection and opposition, as described in the *Súrih* of Húd. It also specifies the duration of the religious dispensations as that of a millennium. This reading of salvation history is rooted in Qur'an 32:5, which states that the *amr* descends from God and ascends unto Him in a time span of a thousand years. The term *amr* can be translated variously as 'cause', 'revelation', 'command', 'order', or 'management of affairs'. Interestingly, some leading Western orientalisists such as Rudi Paret have translated this term as the divine *logos* (1996: 290). Shoghi Effendi's introduction of the term 'progressive revelation' in English is evidently based on his interpretation of the term *amr*, which appears repeatedly in a passage in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh:

Contemplate with thine inward eye the chain of successive Revelations that hath linked [*yašil al-amr*] the Manifestation of Adam with that of the Báb. I testify before

God that each one of these Manifestations hath been sent down through the operation of the Divine Will and Purpose [*'an mashriq al-amr*], that each hath been the bearer of a specific Message, that each hath been entrusted with a divinely revealed Book. . . . The measure of the revelation with which every one of them hath been identified had been definitely foreordained. . . . And when this process of progressive Revelation culminated [*idhā balagha al-amr*] in the stage at which His peerless, His most sacred, and exalted Countenance was to be unveiled to men's eyes, He chose to hide His own Self behind a thousand veils, lest profane and mortal eyes discover His glory.

(*Gleanings* 31.1)

Although the Qur'anic *amr* is supposed to reappear after a period of time, and although the Muslim messianic expectations centre around the return of Christ and the advent of the promised Mahdi, the dogma of the finality of revelation still prevails in Muslim orthodoxy. It is assumed that the chain of revelation has come to an end with the Qur'an, since Muhammad is considered to be the 'seal of the Prophets' (Qur'an 33:40). Bahá'u'lláh confirms that Muhammad was the Seal of Prophets, but He expands the historical frame for contextualizing the statement, explaining that Muhammad sealed the prophetic cycle initiated by Adam and that a new cycle had been inaugurated in which the expectations of the past will be fulfilled (*Gleanings* 25.1).

Therefore, Shoghi Effendi affirmed the concept of an inter-dispensational abrogation and related it to the principle of progressive revelation and the message of Bahá'u'lláh in the following passage:

[T]he Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh abrogates unconditionally all the Dispensations gone before it, upholds uncompromisingly the eternal verities they enshrine, recognizes firmly and absolutely the Divine origin of their Authors, preserves inviolate the sanctity of their authentic Scriptures, disclaims any intention of lowering the status of their Founders or of abating the spiritual ideals they inculcate, clarifies and correlates their functions, reaffirms their common, their unchangeable and fundamental purpose, reconciles their seemingly divergent claims and doctrines, readily and gratefully recognizes their respective contributions to the gradual unfoldment of one Divine Revelation, unhesitatingly acknowledges itself to be but one link in the chain of continually progressive Revelations, supplements their teachings with such laws and ordinances as conform to the imperative needs, and are dictated by the growing receptivity, of a fast evolving and constantly changing society, and proclaims its readiness and ability to fuse and incorporate the contending sects and factions into which they have fallen into a universal Fellowship, functioning within the framework, and in accordance with the precepts, of a divinely conceived, a world-unifying, a world-redeeming Order.

(*God Passes By* 100)

Philosophical perspectives on progressivity and religion

The notion of 'finality' is not only part of religious and theological discourse; it has also seeped into the realm of philosophy, as can be seen in Hegel, who (following in Kant's footsteps) in *Vorlesung über die Philosophie der Geschichte* described mankind's advancement towards perfection through dialectical stages. He viewed world history as 'progress in the consciousness of freedom' (2002: 61). In contrast to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, Hegel's dialectical manifestation of a 'world spirit' reaches its climax in the Christian and Germano-Protestant civilization. Or as Hegel stated: the oriental world knew only that one is free, the Greeks and Romans that some

are free, and the Germanic world knows that all are free. The maturity of humankind and its freedom thus would seem to evolve, for Hegel, in geographic dimensions—that is, from the orient towards the occident. Europe is the end of world history, Asia its beginning (ibid: 168).

For Hegel, Christ was still the ‘axis’ of history. This understanding influenced the German philosopher Karl Jaspers and his concept of the ‘axial age’ (1949: 19). After the catastrophic experience of the Second World War and the Third Reich, Jaspers believed that the oneness of humanity needed to be recognized and established. Eager to unearth the essential similarities between the different world civilizations, he studied the teachings of the ancient—that is, pre-Christian—period and those key individuals who effected a revolutionary leap in the spiritual and intellectual outlook of humanity. He found that these towering figures appeared in China, India, the Holy Land, and Greece more or less synchronously and propelled human civilization to a new level of consciousness. Desiring to overcome the Euro- and Christocentric understanding of his time, Jaspers located what he considered the true roots of humanity to be (with the exception of Greece) on the continent of Asia. He believed that the time was ripe for the birth of a new axial age that would take humanity, and especially the Western world, from its present stage of scientific-technological achievements to a world of reason, communication, and spirituality, in which all the nations would be united in a collaborative order. History, to him, had an origin and a telos, and humanity was moving towards its unification.

Although there are commonalities between Jaspers’s ideas and the Bahá’í teachings, a major difference is that, according to the Bahá’í texts, no divine revelation is final and exclusive as humanity’s journey is always progressing. Consequently, in the Bahá’í teachings, the roots of human civilization need not be exclusively located in the pre-Christian era, and the bearers of standard-setting truths appear continuously: in Christ, before Christ, and after Christ; in Bahá’u’lláh, before Bahá’u’lláh, and after Bahá’u’lláh. Jaspers, however, saw the Bible as the final revelation and had doubts that the challenges of humankind could be solved through the birth of a new religion (1949: 282).

Still, his brilliant insights influenced other thinkers such as the British polymath Arnold Toynbee (1996: 164) and the author Karen Armstrong (2006: 7), who both have suggested that Jaspers’ axial age should be extended to include the Prophet Muhammad as an axial thinker. However, among those writers, Toynbee seems to have been the only one who, in his *Civilization on Trial*, published shortly after the Second World War, recognized the Bahá’í Faith as a major candidate for a new universal religion to shape the destiny of humanity’s common future (1948: 203). Toynbee also found the Bahá’í House of Worship (*mashriqu’l-adhkár*) in Wilmette to be a ‘portent of the future’ (1957: 104)—a keen observation, since the architecture of the House of Worship itself symbolizes the oneness of humanity and of religion and the principle of progressive revelation. The temple in Wilmette which Toynbee referred to has engraved on its exterior pillars the symbols of the various world religions.

Whereas Jaspers, Toynbee, and Armstrong attributed a significant role to the major religions and their founders in fostering the cultivation of a new world civilization, other Western academics have had a hard time discerning any value in the existence of the religions of the world at all. On the assumption that all later religions are only repetitions of the previous ones, they overgeneralize their personal observations, predominantly founded on their knowledge of a single religious tradition, and thus reach hasty conclusions about the nature of (monotheistic) religions. This particular version of the fallacy reflects a kind of ‘matryoshka’ effect, referring to the popular Russian sets of wooden dolls that only differ in size: if you know one of the dolls, you also know the rest. Why spend time scrutinizing the features of the others (Deghani 2014)? Indeed, some thinkers, such as Sigmund Freud and Richard Dawkins (2006: 37), have freely admitted their limited knowledge about the different religious traditions and expressly

stated their assumption that later religions are mere replicas of prior ones. Freud, for example, writes:

The author regretfully has to admit that he cannot give more than one sample, that he has not the expert knowledge necessary to complete the investigation. This limited knowledge will allow him perhaps to add that the founding of the Mohammedan religion seems to him to be an abbreviated repetition of the Jewish one, in imitation of which it made its appearance. There is reason to believe that the Prophet originally intended to accept the Jewish religion in full for himself and his people.

(1939: 148–149)

Conclusion

The concept of progressive revelation challenges some standard assumptions about religion, particularly approaches that reflect the ‘matryoshka’ effect, whereby each religion is assumed to be essentially identical to those before it and that there is ‘no new thing under the sun’ (Ecclesiastes 1:9), thereby disregarding the innovative aspects of religions so clearly expressed in the *khadash* of the Hebrew Bible, in the *kainós* of the New Testament, and in the *jadíd* of the Islamic traditions.

The distinction made in the Bahá’í texts between the inner core of unchanging spiritual verities and the outer aspect of changing social and material teachings throws into relief the points of unity between the religions, while the differences between them also appear, in perspective, as having diminished importance. The clear differentiation between divine revelation and the subsequent accumulation of human interpretations and traditions also invites a re-evaluation of entrenched assumptions that hatred and conflict—as well as superstition and anti-scientific dogmas—are core features of religion that discredit it from serious consideration. Progressive revelation’s multidimensional account of the reality of religion as a process that is both cyclical and linear is not reducible to the standard one-dimensional typologies that classify religions according to characteristics such as exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism. From the Bahá’í perspective, such typologies are unable to capture the multidimensional reality of religion, just as light cannot be reduced to either a particle or a wave.

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