Laozi: A Lost Prophet?

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The Challenge of the Dao De Jing for the
Bahá’í Universe of Discourse

Roland Faber

1. Why Daoism, Laozi and the Dao De Jing ?

Daoism is one of the oldest religions.1 Its roots are lost in pre-history. We find it arise amidst the fog of human awakening to historical consciousness when it begins to manifest itself in old mythological and symbolic archetypes of existence and impresses on us patterns of human wisdom and insight into the nature of existence that immediately strike a cord on various levels of human thought and modes of feeling. It grew from a primordial and pre-confessional mode of religion in the form of incarnations of a worldwide religious consciousness of earlier times (although it has never disappeared completely to this day),2 housed in shamanistic rhythms of living.3 As a spiritual philosophy it arose and developed (at lest in their effect) preeminently from the genius of one person and the medium of one book4 to become a well-established worldview and way of life, religion and cultural self-definition, expressive of the Chinese mind and spirit: Meet the legendary sage Laozi and his incomparable book of ancient, yet in its context novel and unexpected wisdom, the Laozi or Dao De Jing!5

As the Bahá’í Faith recognizes all religions and wisdom traditions to be the expression of one divine origin,6 the acknowledgement of

Daoism, Laozi and the Dao De Jing must be of preeminent importance. They demand attention not only for the reconstruction of one of the most influential streams of religious history of humanity7 — as all religious streams are considered to be flowing into the universal openness of the Bahá’í revelation, which receives them as moments of one history of religious awakening and as past expressions of it own pre-history.8 What is more, they command to be heard in their own contributions to the future of humanity, as all

religions contribute their specific uniqueness to the unity of religions,9 a unity which in the image of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá must be understood as a unification by differentiation, where the manifold highlights the beauty of this confluence.10

The coming considerations set out to frame this task in three related facets: First, they want to demonstrate the uniqueness of the contributions of Daoism especially as mediated through Laozi and the Dao De Jing to a future universal religious consciousness that the Bahá’í revelation is said to have instigated, although we might not yet be able to see its future contours clearly or at all.11 Second, they want to explicate resonances with and differences from the Bahá’í universe, less in principles, as both traditions are overwhelmingly compatible,12 but rather taking the(philosophical and religious) emphases into account that renders Daoism enlightening beyond its historical situatedness because of the genius of Laozi and the Laozi and their reception throughout history.13 Third, such considerations cannot avoid the question whether or not, if such a religion is one of the major expressions of the one source that has also animated Bahá’u’lláh, Daoism should be considered a genuine dispensation of a divine Manifestation; whether or not, then, the Laozi must be read as scripture, expressing the one revelation in a unique (historical) body; and whether or not the figure of Laozi and the book of the Dao De Jing should be considered a temple (haykal) of revelation14 in the sense that we would accept for the so-called “Big Five” (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism)15 with the addition of Zoroastrianism, all of which Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi recognized as genuine dispensations under the influence of a Manifestation.16 In other words, are we with Laozi and the Dao De Jing encountering a (lost) prophet and his book?17

Why should this be challenging to the Bahá’í universe of discourse?18 Because compared with the “Big Five” (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and Zoroastrianism, the Bahá’í writings entertain only scant references to other religions,19 such as “Chinese religions,” and in particular virtually none to Daoism nor Laozi, nor the Dao De Jing.20 This in light of the fact that we do find at least several references of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi to China, Chinese religion(s)21 and especially Confucius, although the exact status of these in the Bahá’í universe is far from definite beyond any doubt either.22 Yet, since the absence of evidence should not be taken as a sign for the evidence of absence,23 the fact that the Bahá’í writings know of Confucianism, but emphasizes it as an ethics with Confucius as an ethical reformer (as contrasted with the Buddha as Manifestation and Buddhism as religion)24 — although there are indications to the contrary25 — should make us even more inclined to investigate the status of one of the “other” original

sources of religion and philosophy, wisdom and life in China, namely, the tacit “presence” of Daoism in the legacy of Laozi and one of its “constitutional” texts,26 the Dao De Jing.27 After approaching Daoism, Laozi and the Dao De Jing historically and philosophically as well as religiously and referencing resonances with the Bahá’í universe of discourse, its principles and worldview, I will reflect on the fascinating and rewarding question regarding the (potential) status of Laozi in the Bahá’í universe of discourse. By connecting the insights gathered, and in light of only scant evidence (but with some arguments from the Bahá’í writings), I will not answer this question definitively, but rather consider several alternatives of how to potentially understand Laozi from a Bahá’í perspective, altogether developing eight alternative views for future consideration.28

2. Defining “Daoism”

We can assume that some of the Daoist texts are very old, predating the organization of a Daoist movement or religion. While we may find estimations that some of these texts in their original form (not the received texts) go back to the Zhou dynasty (1000 B.C.E. – 300 B.C.E.), in any “organized” form “Daoism” appears around the beginning of the second century B.C.E. as an established and distinct philosophy,29 but as religious identity, Daoism was

probably not organized before the movement of the Celestial Masters in the second century C.E.30

In the west, serious attempts of understanding Daoist texts and Daoism as a phenomenon can be dated only to the beginning of the 20th century C.E. The Dao De Jing, the book traditionally assigned to the ancient sage Laozi, was only translated in the 1860s and the preceding reception of Daoism in the west was littered with prejudices: that it is a primitive wisdom tradition, closer to primordial forms of shamanism than any western concept of religion and even further removed from what could possibly count as philosophy; that it represents an irrational, chaotic, even anarchic approach to reality far removed from the understanding of Confucianism as a “rational” wisdom then prevalent among intellectuals and philosophers in the west receptive to Chinese thought; that it is really a non-philosophy falling under the ban of Plato on poets31 since they seek imagination instead of truth; and that it seemed to have been too much involved in esoteric Chinese folk practices like alchemy as to be taken seriously.32

However, as soon as the philosophical side of Daoism was discovered to be actually of considerable interest in its contrasts to western thought patterns, unfortunately, a new division was introduced. Insofar as we can differentiate between the religion of Daoism (Dao Jiao) and its philosophical texts, like the Dao De Jing

(Dao Jia),33 interests shifted to the excavation of the noble ideas from the crude folk elements salvaging the philosophy from the primitive religion, which to the dismay of the philosophical purist exhibits the belief in ghosts and ancestral ceremonies or alchemical endeavors in the search for physical immortality.34 Newer research (conscious of such biases) has, however, shown that this is a short-sided approach as both Daoist religion and philosophy are intimately intertwined in the life of the people that followed and still follow their teachings.35

Then again, as this integrated gestalt becomes more and more visible today, we are forced to step outside of the western prejudices regarding that which it grants the title of a religion.36 This is, of course, a reminder that the phenomenon of religion and its wisdom as well as its relationship to philosophical thought and insight are much more complex, intricate and fascinating than the fairly recent western

definitions of religion would seem to suggest and (based on the Greek antagonisms) its presumed opposition to philosophy would allow to be discovered.37 Since one of the most profound claims of the Bahá'í Faith is the unity of all religions and their divine origin,38 it is a good exercise in this encounter to probe the Bahá'í universe of discourse as it ventures outside of these pervasive western limitations whereby it may discover a truly different way how religion can be lived and how thought can "strangely" understand the world and its existential grounds, how human beings can practice spiritual existence and for what reason human beings express spiritual and religious aims socially and intellectually.39

3. Revelation or Wisdom?

Yet another difference becomes quickly visible as long as one tries grasping Daoism from the perspective of Abrahamic experiences and thought patterns: there seems in early Chinese history not to have been any claim (or concept) of revelation of a divinity or of a divine messenger such as that which has structured the mutually related Abrahamic traditions at least from the Hebrew's experience of the exodus from Egypt on.40 Hence, in her book on The Chinese Religions and the Bahá'í Faith, Phyllis Chew leaves us with this profound statement: "Thus, while the Baha'i Faith is established as a revealed religion brought by a prophet-messenger, the Chinese religion is not. The Chinese religion is a unique instance of a religion without revelation, a religion with the sage as a central figure rather than a prophet."41 The sage is a holy figure or (like the early Greek seeker of wisdom Pythagoras) a philosopher who teaches a method of life and lives what he teaches,42 one who is versed in the mysteries of the cosmos and how its rules influence human existence.43

Nevertheless, we must also not overlook that Daoism at certain

points in its development constructed notions that Bahá'ís understand to be essential to their own identity — in the case of Daoism virtually before any other religion, philosophy or cultural pool of ideas: that the aim of society is the establishment of the Most Great Peace, understood to include the whole of humanity, not just a tribe or specific culture;44 that the notion of religion is not necessarily a western invention as Daoism viewed itself self-consciously as a religion (although just not in the western sense);45

that Daoism developed into a "state religion" — something Shoghi Effendi expected to happen with countries of majority Bahá'í populations;46 and most interestingly, that Daoism indeed developed into a revealed religion revering scriptures and worshipping holy figures such as Laozi as divine.47 Again, given such evidence we might learn that wisdom and revelation are not necessarily opposing categories48 even if the order of their appearance and their spiritual relevance for the concrete life of the respective societies is not the same as in the Abrahamic context.49

4. What is the Dao?

One important point must be mentioned before all else: all Chinese religions (and philosophical schools) relate in one or another way to the Dao, not only Daoism.50 Confucianism and other Chinese schools (such as Legalism or Mohism) as well as Chinese Buddhism also speak of and identify with the concept of the Dao even if they perceive and conceive it differently.51 Nevertheless, in all Chinese wisdom schools and religions (or intersecting religious streams)the Dao presents what we could call ultimate reality. Accordingly, Alan Watts, one of the most well known popularizers of the "strange" imaginations and thoughts of Daoism and Buddhism in the west in the second half of the 20th century, defines the Dao as "the mystery that we can never understand — the unity that underlies the opposites."52 This "definition" gives us a first hint at the profound nature of the concept and its importance, namely, besides any particularities and pedantries to connect us with the world as a whole in such a way that the most hidden secret of the inner workings of the world is revealed: that there are no fixed oppositions or opposites;53 that all is always involved in the movement of one into the other; that not divisive strive has the last word, but the harmony of oppositional movements.54

Dao means the Way and the Method that the world movement is exhibiting in everything.55 In this sense, all things are daos, actions and activities engaged in such movements of overcoming oppositions and creating ever-new harmonies. This world activity is what is understood as the "natural" process of things.56 Nature (ziran) means that which operates on it own; everything exists and proceeds by

itself, is “self-so.”57 The best one can do when one has gained this

insight is to let the Dao work through all actions one performs, that is, if one does not try to act against the flow of the movements of harmonization, but acts with it. In doing so, one reaches the height of activity in accordance with the Dao as long as one does not (coercively) act against its all-wise movements (wu wei).58 And if one learns to live this way, one becomes a perfect human being (zhenren).59

The Dao is the ultimate of ultimates, the unnamable, but it is manifest in all phenomena (without being identical with them).60 “How deep and mysterious this unity is/How profound, how great!/It is the truth beyond the truth, /the hidden within the hidden/It is the path to all wonder/the gate to the essence of everything.”61 We are reminded of similar Bahá’í expressions of ultimate reality as can be found in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings indicating the unknowable,62 but all-pervasive divine reality beyond any name (al-haqq)63 and the mutuality of even these “opposites”64: “O Thou Who art the most manifest of the manifest and the most hidden of the hidden!” [PM #155]65

5. Who is Laozi?

Laozi figures as the “founder” of (philosophical) Daoism.66 Yet, this description is already tainted by western misperceptions. Laozi was for all intents and purposes a sage who lived in the 6th century B.C.E., presumably before the Buddha. He was — trusting tradition — a scribe and scholar at the exceptional library of the court of Zhou (an extraordinary achievement in itself). In these traditions, he appears as the teacher of Confucius, although this is less clear as he may instead represent a culmination or personification of the confluence of several ancient and honored traditions and personalities.67 Maybe he is just a literary figure identified with an “Old Master” (Lao-Zi)68 who represents and functions as a convergence of the old wisdom sayings of the Zhou time collected into the Laozi or Dao De Jing. First mention of his identity as a person is made long after he is supposed to have lived, namely, in the Book of History (Shih Ji) around 150 B.C.E., which also makes mention of “Daoism” as an already established philosophical school at that time.69

Laozi is often depicted as an old man with long white beard (westerners may immediately identify someone else with this description), riding a bull, riding to leave his country because no one wants to hear his wisdom, or, much later, as a divinity in ornate attire enthroned in heaven.70 The story is passed down that Confucius asked

Laozi for advice on rituals (li) related to ghosts and ancestors still roaming the world and haunting, in the opinion of the people, their families and villages. Laozi is presented here as a soul-guide who knows how to perform rituals for the save passage of the departed or to accompany the shamanic journey of the soul into spiritual realms.71 In any case, the importance of this development of the figure of Laozi with his growing myth and divinization over the next millennium in the east is only underscored by his elation to the status of one of the rare "axial" philosophical, religious and spiritual figures in the west by which the German philosopher Karl Jasper's famously identified the revolutionary and decisive axial age of human awakening to a new universal spiritual consciousness in a timeframe of several centuries around the mid first millennium B.C.E., a status only rivaled by figures such as Socrates, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Confucius and Isaiah.72

These old stories already show influences of the two other important religions of Chinese culture, Confucianism and Buddhism, which will, in this triangulation, drive the dynamic of Chinese religions and culture for the centuries to come.73 In Daoist lore, Laozi is introduced as the sage by whom Daoism or certain Daoist schools assert its superiority over Confucianism and Buddhism and their related schools. He is the superior wise man. He was supposedly born from a virgin after having been sixty (!) or so years in her body, emerging an "old baby" when he finally came into this world (one meaning of "Laozi" is "old boy").74 That he is imagined to be the superior sage can also be witnessed by the belief that when he left his country he is said to have gone to India and to have taught the Buddha or even to have been reborn as the Buddha.75

Here, as Bahá'ís will notice, a transformation takes place that resonates with the Bahá'í teachings of recurrent Manifestations of the divine. And in the case of Laozi, it is even a movement across religions.76 In other instantiations of such a cyclical recurrence, the divine figures like that of Hindu Avatars and the infinite Buddhas of

Mahayana generally remain within their own religious sphere to express the uniqueness and identity of these traditions.77 An interesting exception occurs with the Vaishnavite belief that the Buddha is integral to the series of Avatars of Vishnu or Krishna.78 Yet in this case, for similar reasons that Daoism taught that Laozi was instructing or even becoming the Buddha, this crossing of religious boundaries and integration of foreign or even hostile figures was meant to demonstrate the superiority of the "parent" religion79 — something Bahá'u'lláh has categorically rejected.80

6. What is the Laozi (or the Dao De Jing)?

The story of Laozi in the Book of History culminates in the significant event of the creation of the Dao De Jing.81 In protest to the unwise government of the Zhou, Laozi decides to from China.82 One may understand this move as spiritual retreat from political machinations, or, by giving it a different twist, one could also view this act as a more radical protest since it was assumed that to life in China meant to be in the sphere of civilization while outside China basically barbarism had the rule.83 Not only does such a political protest in Laozi's act of emigration, if it may be assumed, uncover this so-called "civilization," so held high by its powers-to-be, as itself corrupt and barbarian.84 This highly symbolic statement also could have implied that Laozi was forgoing the folk belief, or was accepting the consequences of abandoning this belief, that one part of the multilayered human soul must be buried in Chinese earth in order for the departed person to have immortal life.85

Now, at the border, the guard, who is the silent hero of this story, discovers that the approaching rider is Laozi (what a feat considering the vast land that was and is China!), the famous sage, and after hearing his story asks him, at least, before he leaves to write down his wisdom so that future generations would not forever be bereft of his insights and all knowledge of ultimate reality, and a life according to its eternal laws would be lost. In one hour, so the story continues, Laozi writes the whole wisdom of existence down in only five thousand characters — the time dilation and brevity being the signs of his extreme wisdom. Thus was created the Dao De Jing.86

The received text of the Laozi is a collection87 of short, poetic, mystical, ethical and political sayings, interspersed with longer comments of explanation.88 It is structured into eighty-one chapters. Note that this reflects nine to the second power, nine being the Chinese number of the Emperor, heavenly order and long lastingness89 — somewhat in resonance with the Bahá'í understanding of the number nine, besides being the Abjad number of the word bahá'.90 Further, the Laozi has two parts: the Dao Jing, which explores the nature of ultimate reality (dao), and the De Jing, which meditates on the cultivation of the virtues (de) of the Dao necessary to become a sage and a perfect human being, or to rule justly and to order society according to cosmic harmony.91

Research has shone that this is a very old structure, maybe finding together as a collection as early as 500 B.C.E.,92 which we can already find settled in the oldest extant versions of the text from around 300 B.C.E., excavated in the 1970s and 1990s.93 The characters of the Laozi are painted on bamboo strips, which are attached to one another and can be rolled up so as to not lose their integrity as a whole. While over the centuries the order of the two parts may have

been reversed in some collections, the general structure and order of the sayings are preserved.94 The characters are of ancient complexity, and no translation can hope to fathom the depth of the field of reference they invoke or to establish a final correct relationship between them.95 This fact, and the perceived depth of insight that the Laozi conveys, has led to one of the vastest libraries of commentaries and translations of any Chinese classic, maybe only rivaled by that of the Bible.96

7. Understanding Philosophical Daoism (Dao Jia)

Given all of these uncertainties, but also the astonishing integrity of the text of the Dao De Jing, we can expect a great variety of interpretations97 as the context changes over the course of time and the transformations of Chinese culture, that is, as the text moves through its use by different schools of thought98 and also begins to serve a variety of political interests99 as well as the mutual discussions and strives for supremacy with and between other Chinese religions, especially Confucianism and Buddhism.100 If we try to situate the text of the Laozi in its own process of becoming, we will, however, gain

some valuable insight in its meaning or, at least, some layers of its perceived importance.

Here is one such attempt. The Laozi as well as Daoism as philosophy in general should be understood as a reaction against Confucianism (not as its origin).101 It explores an alternative to Confucian imperialism that in comparison exhibits the characteristics and implementation of a highly hierarchically stratified society, a petrified system of education (canalizing mostly the control over of the court scribes, religious representatives and other political officials) and the worship of the court as means of political unification of the diverse lands and regional powers. Daoism, instead, appeals to the equality of all people and diverse peoples of the realm, favors small integrated communities instead of large political entities of military and economic power that shift wealth to the political and religious elites, and, hence, intends to function as a model of life in which power is distributed among a vast multiplicity of communities.102

This counter-imagination of living together is in itself obviously a dangerous idea to entertain in a society that is based on idealized and divinized political and religious powers, and its reservoir of alternative ideas and ways of living has, in fact, led to occasional political tumult and insurrections against the sanctioned establishment.103 The concurrent Daoist ethics that grounds this (some would say) anarchic understanding of society has left us with one of the earliest instantiations of cultural, political and spiritual

relativism, which was based on the insistence on individual responsibility (instead of obedience to authority), mutual dependence of all people and institutions (instead of divinization of higher institutions and personalities), and a life that is oriented toward living in harmony with nature (ziran) and its cycles (instead of the excesses if poisoning social constructions).104

The inner working of this universe of discourse is based on the precise understanding of the Dao as the way and method of living — or skill at living.105 The Dao, here, is not a description of reality or ultimate reality, for that matter, but prescribes a way of acting with the flow of nature (and the nature of things).106 The Dao does not tell us what is or why it is, but how acts can be performed in accordance to the rules of the natural, all-pervading movement of the Dao. If

one "follows" the Dao, one knows how to perform something the right way.107 The Dao cannot be known (theoretically); it must be done. One must train in the Dao's way by learning to see the signs of the natural movement of all things and by acting accordingly. To follow the Dao is akin to the know-how of cutting wood the right way, that is, not counter to its nature, its appearance, its structures and patterns. One cuts wood without effort if one knows how to follow these natural forms given in the pattern of a piece of wood;108 one traces the Dao if one knows how a situation has arisen and will develop and without effort follows its development.109

Daoism's relativistic claim is based on a divergent interpretation from Confucianism and other (political) schools.110 For Confucian philosophy, the Dao is a universal law that dictates the social relationships as a norm-system one must follow in order not to lose ones face or honor.111 Mohism embraced this approach and understood the Dao to represent a norm of existence we must pursue.112 Yet, Daoism critiqued this approach and instead understood at least the universal Dao not as normative rule, because any norm is itself a dao that needs a justification in a higher norm (dao). This leads to an infinite regress without finding a highest norm from which the hierarchical claim of Confucianism could be justified.113Yet the consequence Daoism draws from this insight is not that this regress is absurd, as western logic might have concluded, but that the universal Dao is beyond any norm, that the ultimate is relativistic, depriving us of any ability for the deduction of norms.114 Hence, social order is uncovered here as relative, that is, as a social construction, not as a natural necessity; and, hence, political power must be considered as relative, too.115

The Daoist Dao is, therefore, set against and highly critical of any fixed norm system and in some radical sense anarchic (or based on spontaneity).116 It proposes that there cannot be only one norm

system of society one must follow as a divine order, but suggests many equally valid ways of living together. The natural norm is, now, that of a nature that moves in cycles of harmonization, universally and in the mutual relationship of all things, persons, forms and structures.117 As nature does not force any natural norm or law, many societies can co-exist and coinhere without force and with different

rules according to their situatedness and internal and external relationships in any given moment of their mutual interference.118

This Daoist interpretation of reality reveals two related perspectives: On the one hand, the Dao is mystical as it is inaccessible and beyond any articulation (as a norm); it is mirrored only in the experience of the experienced master, sage and perfect human being.119 On the other hand, the Dao is relativistic, but in the sense of the mutual relationship of all beings in their coinherent movement of living together; and the daos (acts, norms) do not "exist" out there, but must be created in the flow of things and acts.120

8. Understanding the Dao De Jing

The inherent paradox that the Laozi displays in such a mystical and relativistic understanding of the Dao is staggering, because it conveys the counter-movement of two in themselves coherent, but mutually seemingly excluding expressions of existence. On the one hand, the mystical insight of someone following the Dao would indicate that one can know how to act in accordance with the Dao; but, on the other hand, because of the relativistic side there is no fixed anchor in any ultimate expression of the Dao that justifies any particular direction of acting as normative or "in the right way." In other words, to follow the Dao means that there is no "right" Dao to pursue. Only if one gains the insight that there is not one "right" Dao to follow, one actually follows the Dao.121

The ethical implications are of utmost relevance here: one should not cling to tradition, rigid rightness and correct language if one wants to follow the Dao. The wisdom of achieving perfection does not appear by following preconceived virtues, but by learning to performing "virtuosity" in living (de), the ethical impulse of the Dao.122 The Laozi explains that it is not nature that is ambivalent, but society; society's constructed norms are forceful misconstructions of the flow of the Dao in the interconnectedness of all things.123 It is not nature, but society that with its social norms and tainted language creates the very desires that deprives us of deeper insight into the Dao. It is not nature, but society that is at the root of evils as it forces us into unnatural desires and conflicts laying life's course

out as a matter of competition and war.124 Peace comes only though

harmony with nature and the Dao that is its nature.125

The interesting insight that follows from this paradox is that only without fixed norms and preconceived patterns of existence do we become able to withhold from a life of conflict and war. By becoming mutually coinherent, we lose the ability to "other" the stranger, the other culture or religion. In not acting forcefully, we harmonize with Harmony itself. War and strive are, in this understanding, not an implication of nature, but of society, tradition, blind obedience, socially awakened desires, fads, compromises of self-interest, competition, mutual exclusion, and the clash of force and counter-force. It is not law and order that guaranty peace, but, on the contrary, the anarchy of moving harmony. It is not determination of rightness, but the relativity of living together in concrete circumstances in which the Dao becomes the event of peace. Peace arises "self-so" (ziran) not by acting, but be letting be (wu wei) of any presupposed concept and the division that it would induce.126 This is the meta-theme of the Laozi; this is the way of the Dao: "The Dao/Way that can be dao-ed/walked is not the constant Dao/Way. The name/language that can be named/ spoken/expressed is not the constant name/language."127

If we were to penetrate deeper into the spirit of the Chinese relationship between the three great traditions, Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, it would be at this point that we could find a hint enlightening the very fact that there were never religious wars between them. While quarrels always arose were respective representatives of these traditions were self-involved with political interests and powers over the centuries of their coexistence and interaction, these conflicts never amounted to the religious wars raging between the Abrahamic religions and the various factions within them, leaving trails and rivers of blood in the western chronicles of history to this very day.128 It is the interconnectedness of this relativity of the Dao in all things that resonated with the Mahayana notion of co-origination or dependent co-arising (pratitya-samutpada); and it is the relativism of withholding the attachment to fixed norms that mirrors Buddhist detachment in the same way that the Daoist insight of the constructedness and impermanence of any social structure as well as any desire created by social interaction

resonates deeply with the attitude of overcoming impermanence by such detachment.129 Since this attitude is one of peace, it can only be found in the heightening and refinement of the perception of the harmonies in the flowing multiplicity of happenings that constitute any situation and world, much like the coincidence of detachment and compassion in Buddhism.130

Another Daoist insight strengthens this impression. The eternal or

constant Dao, since it follows no rule besides interconnectedness and harmonization of opposites, is itself bare of interest or self-existence.131 The Dao is empty (wu), like the ultimate reality in Buddhism, nirvana, the state beyond being and non-being, or dharmakaya, the Dharma-body of the Buddha, the transcendent Wisdom of emptiness of all phenomena (sunyata).132 The Dao is not a being, but nothingness (wuji), and as such it is the mother of all things (taiji).133 “The Dao is both Named and Nameless / As Nameless, it is the origin of all things / As Named, it is the mother of all things.”134 In fact, all happenings (daos) are empty (wu), that is, again correlative to Buddhism, impermanent, changing, related to all other daos, and spontaneous (creative).135 There are infinitely many daos and the world is their infinite movement without beginning and end.

The relativistic ethic of Daoism, then, imprints on its adherents values of tolerance, cooperation, mutual understanding and peace. It instills on us136 the importance of non-violence: that it is better to be like water that collects itself at the lowest point and, in its patient letting be, is stronger in weakness than the force of a rock, which is formed by water.137 Furthermore, we are asked to always differentiate into more than two daos, that is, always to escape the dualism of opposition and strife.138 Finally, we are lured into becoming creative, that is, self-responsible, not to (blindly) follow traditional norms, but to always create new ways that escape oppositional thinking and acting.139 In this sense, we are reminded of many Bahá’í principles of non-oppositional unity and difference, mutuality and creative responsibility140 and may marvel in the fact that these insights appeared not late in any assumed spiritual maturation of humanity, but were already always there to be perceived and to be activated.141

9. Resonances with the Bahá’í Faith

Of the many resonances with the Bahá’í Faith, I will only name a few, the ones that immediately demonstrate the congruence of their intentions even while coming from vastly different cultures and times.142 First, the Dao, ultimate Reality, is a mystery, utterly unapproachable, beyond any category and expression of itself while all else is its expression — like the unknowable essence of the “(God) Beyond” (the utter divine transcendence as understood in the Bahá’í context) and the infinity of divine attributes that constitute the essence of all things (divine immanence) — all together faint expressions of the apophatic unmanifest Ultimate and the plurisingularity of the manifest God (Primal Manifestation, Mind, Will, Spirit, Word, Light).143 Both the Dao’s apophatic and manifest “oneness” is like unto that of the Bahá’í understanding, while on the vastly different background of Islamic thought, namely, not a number, a one, and not any “form” of identity such as an self-identical being or of any “character” of sameness.144 In this sense, the

Reality (al-haqq) of the Dao is “empty” (wu) of secondary differentiations, abstractions and projections.145 Like the central Islamic term for the unity of God, tawhid, the Dao is inexpressible, beyond (any limiting notion of) oneness and multiplicity alike,146 but — other than purely iconoclastic readings of this unity — out of its generosity their “friend.”147 The Dao is like unto the Godhead beyond any attributes (or indifferent from them in their infinity)148 and, hence, beyond any “kinds” of opposites, divisions, and divides.149 Yet, it also seeks to overcome such opposites — which is the secret of the first message of Bahá’u’lláh at the first Ridvan: that there is only unity if it realizes itself (or we let it realize itself) beyond strive and war.150 And the Dao is spontaneous, without reason creating and letting everything create their reality from the infinity of “divine” immanence in everything.151 The Dao/ Reality is always manifesting as and in renewal. “For if God speaks a word today that comes to be on the lips of all the people, before and after, that word will be new, if you only think about it.”152

Second, the Daoism of Laozi engenders in us153 the ancient knowledge of the relativity of religious truth that the Bahá’í Faith made its central conviction.154 “Our” dao is relative to the exigencies of the time;155 it expresses itself differently in different minds;156 and

it reflects the unique mixture of attributes one realizes from its infinity in one’s “character” (of persons, times, cultures, religions)157 — much like the contextual relativity of revelations and their finite reception by any peoples as related by Bahá’u’lláh.158 “The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man — finite mind — and are conditioned by its limitations” [GWB #26].

Third, in relation to the so-called principles of the Bahá’í Faith,159 we find the Laozi to inculcate similar or resonant spiritual and ethical, social and political impulses.160 To follow the universally harmonizing Dao, one must become empty of Self (wu) and in letting go become a universal person receptive to the flow of things, perceptive of the whole world at any moment.161 One must learn to relate harmoniously one to the other and everything, and try to engage any situation from a non-oppositional and creative perspective that avoids, overcomes, or mitigates oppositions. In this context, opinions only become relevant if they are mutually justifying their differences, that is, if they employ the movement of unity (of differences) into a peaceful future.162 Further, one should not imitate any social norm just because of its constancy within certain traditions or because it is held up by any social, cultural, political, or religious authority. Rather, one should begin to think, see, perceive and act from one’s own insight into one’s

interconnectedness with everything and everyone in every situation. One should also avoid prejudices, as they are nothing but stabilized oppositions locking us into our thoughts, language and habits that again force destruction, superiority and supersession to arise.163 The most basic impulse of the Laozi is the “ecological” unification of the whole world, not just of humanity,164 into one movement of a multiplicity, that is, the manifold of interrelated daos/ways in which religions, cultures, and humanity in their diversity are related as one movement of peace.165 One is immediately reminded of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s allegory of the diverse beauty of a garden as an ecological image of unity and interconnection. Here mutual relatedness and peaceful differentiation, complexity and beauty become measures of unity and peace.166 To follow the Dao means to live without any fixed way, always anew, always engaged in an evolving mindscape of peace that is already the ultimate reality of the movement toward itself.167

Fourth, from the aforementioned points it may have become clear that unity is valued higher that the particular claim of truth of/for oneself over (and against) others or the particular importance of ones actions and thought over (and against) others. As perceiving truth is related to different situations, limitations, and the manifold of realizations of the attributes of reality, so is practicing truth also always already a matter of situatedness and receptiveness.168 To seek unity through communication or consultation is the “natural” way to go, that is, a way that overcomes the poisonous creations of desires in societies, as is the fact that such processes of harmonization will emphasize the minorities among themselves since such harmonizations can never be suppressive of differences, but must highlight them in a manifold of togetherness by which unity is enriched.169 Therefore, difference is essential to any deep understanding of unity170 and has priority over “being right” — much like Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá teach.171

Nevertheless, Daoism provides its challenges for a Bahá’í understanding of religious unity and equality. The question is, for instance, how (or even whether) we can find a space “within” the coordinate system of a universe of discourse that has (not necessarily originated, but) mostly developed in the western or at least Abrahamic context, or better: how to expand and transform this coordinate system so as to allow for unity on the basis of a more universal equality?172 In fact, Daoism challenges us to constantly remain aware of the limitations of such traditional molds of understanding the depth of its intention and message.173 We note that the vast Daoist universe of discourse in its internal diversity and complexity, and its multiplicity of sources and dimensions, is not bound by categories of revelation or prophetic establishment, any necessarily personal notion of God or an ultimate Reality conceived

as God at all.174

Although Daoist explications of existence can occasionally approximate some of the Abrahamic categories with the implied worldview of a history of divine interaction with the world and humanity and a soteriology that wants to liberate humanity from its predicament (Heilsgeschichte),175 note also that it is not primarily interested in such a framework, but rather rests on wisdom of self-cultivation, critical of habitual sedimentations, and living with

"nature" (ziran, self-so) more than with any Godhead.176 And we note also that there is the radical social criticism and (epistemological and ontological) relativism regarding constructions of power and an equally anarchic perspective on the movement of the world from spontaneity, rather than any fixed order; there is no eternal law to follow, except the apophatic movement of harmonization.177 The Daoist watchword is creativity (or spontaneity) in which everything else is enfolded.178 Hence, we, from a receptive Bahá'í context of listening, will only make progress in appreciating even this seeming "strangeness" (of non-theism, non-controlling and –controlled order of creativity, of spontaneous happenings, of radical immanence of ultimate reality in the cosmic movements) as expression of philosophical communication and religious oneness179 when we learn to understand all of these terms in a different way, namely, on their own background: that of the eternal becoming of harmonies.180 In this context, historical progress is nothing compared with the insights of the cyclical workings of the universe.181 And this approach shows itself even in the fact that ancient sages could develop notions of a universal civilization of peace that defies any simple understanding of progression.182

The implications for a fruitful (interreligious) conversation will be far-reaching, beyond any specific engagement with a specific wisdom tradition, but we may learn a great deal from the unique feature of the Daoist universe of discourse and spirituality. If we, for instance, recognize and acknowledge that the Dao De Jing indicates a major milestone in (and for) the development of a world civilization,183 the fact that it has (yet) to become a consciously perceived, even if unconsciously already permeating, part of the universal unity of religions projected in the Bahá'í universe of discourse will lead to the question, how this (compared with other religious traditions) relative absence of sustained reflections and dialogues, acknowledging, engaging, and even integrating its contributions, maybe transformed into the structuring of a future, developed Bahá'í self-consciousness of having fulfilled and sublimated (or even subsumed) all such earlier endeavors as their culmination?184 Hopefully, future realizations of unity and difference in the spirit of receptivity and mutuality,

especially from the Bahá'í perspective, will show.185 The profound challenge that the contrasted differences and resonances, especially in the reception of the Dao De Jing, provide if they are engaged in a

spirit of unity may be that we will want to accept, or even love,186 the insight that the unity of religions can never be understood, or merely achieved, as a fixed state, but must always (anew) be performed in processes of profound mutual contrasting.187 We shall (and will want to) seek mutuality with the "other" and one another, contemporaneously and diachronically, allowing for surprising supplementations of the known by the unknown; and we must (and will always want to) be ready to be enriched by future and past contributions,188 from wherever they arise.189 Mutual respect and learning are not just practical virtues, then, but divine characteristics of a "unity in multiplicity"190 that the Bahá'í reading of its own tradition and of the signs of the world, its predicaments, pressing issues, and diagnoses of illness needs to unfold as it unfolds itself. Maybe the contributions of the Dao De Jing (among other classics of Chinese philosophical, and wisdom, and religious traditions), as it speaks surprisingly with a fresh and current voice today, may not only contribute to the colors of the garden of truth and a future civilization of peace, but also, with its holistic, yet processual view of all spheres of human life, from individual and social virtues to ecological and cosmic integrity, uniquely color their realization.

10. Is Laozi a "Lost Prophet"?

After these short approximations to and glimpses in to the nature and relevance of Daoism, Laozi and the Dao De Jing in their contributions for the foundation of Chinese civilization,191 if not human civilization, their importance for the Bahá'í universe of discourse, and from a current global consciousness of interreligious conversations for a future civilization of peace, I can now address a question that has lingered beneath these considerations all along. Given everything mentioned above, of resonance between one of the oldest living religions and wisdoms on this earth and the Bahá'í Faith, one of the youngest religions: what should we think of Laozi and the Laozi in a Bahá'í universe? How can this sage and this book be related to the scheme of cyclical revelation throughout the history and becoming of humanity as embraced and expounded by the Bahá'í universe?192 Could we think of Laozi in terms of, or at least similar to, a Manifestation, such as (or much like) the Buddha and Jesus? And if not, how do we understand the fascinating congruencies between

these profound religious traditions, bridging several thousands of years, if one of them were not to be considered to be authorized by "divine inspiration" or "revelation," but derives from "nature" the

common essential ingredients of a divine, human, religious and universal unity and a peace for which the Bahá'í Faith stands?193 The Bahá'í writings give us very few hints as to the station of Laozi and his namesake book. Of course, as already mentioned, the general rule of Bahá'u'lláh that all religions reflect one apophatic divine source, would imply that Daoism is (and has itself proven to be) a true religion so that we would be justified to spiritually understand and revere its scriptures,194 especially the Laozi, and consider them in some meaningful sense as a "revelation" of the mystery beyond names.195 But even if so, we are in a more precarious situation as the Bahá'í writings seem, at the same time, to deny Laozi the status of a Manifestation or Prophet, minor or major. "Regarding Lao-Tse," Shoghi Effendi writes, "The Bahá'ís do not consider him a prophet, or even a secondary prophet or messenger, unlike Buddha or Zoroaster, both of whom were divinely-appointed and fully independent Manifestations of God."196 Conversely, it is interesting to note that both the Muslim Ahmediyyah community and the Vietnamese Cao Dai religion (originating in the same general timeframe) accept Laozi as divine Manifestation, much like the Buddha.197

However, despite Shoghi Effendi's statement that Bahá'ís don't know of Laozi as a Manifestation, we cannot (on its own and by its singular status) be sure what this statement actually includes or excludes. Considering the stunning synergies between Daoism and the Bahá'í Faith — not forgetting that Daoism is a valuable and important dialogue partner in the interreligious dialogues worldwide today, but also that such a dialogue is what Bahá'u'lláh has asked us to pursue198 — we seem at least to owe ourselves, and for the purpose of the imperative to pursue universal religious dialogue, the effort to understand as much as possible the coordinates that would allow us to explore the relationship the Bahá'í writings can invite us to establish with Laozi and his book, the Dao De Jing. I understand this situation as an appeal to create a tentative and open framework in which it becomes possible and fitting actually to pursue such relationships, practically, in spiritual community, but also in reflection on the potentials of mutual consciousness and insight inherent in such a universal religious community.199 Such an approach

could maybe begin with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wise instruction to engage with the Chinese religious, spiritual and philosophical mind and heart, and its sages and scriptures: "imbued with their spirit; know their sacred literature; …and speak to them from their own standpoint, and their own terminologies."200 So, here are, from my understanding of the potentials such an approach could have for the Bahá'í universe of discourse, eight theses for an open framework of mutual interreligious communication, pondering on why maybe, or maybe why not, and in what sense the sage Laozi (and his book) might be

considered a mirror of the Sun of Truth. Yet, as such a space of potential differentiations is not meant to define a specific outcome, a definitive answer, it rather wants to envision and tentatively walk through a field of perceptivity in which the concept of Manifestations (and its relation to religious communities and their truth claims) can shine in its fascinating complexity for further interreligious investigations in general.

Thesis 1: Laozi was a holy soul, influenced by the Buddha

According to this thesis, which is occasionally ventilated in Bahá'í reflections on the matter, Laozi is not a Manifestation or Prophet in the Bahá'í sense, but a holy and pure soul who, like Confucius,201 was under the influence of another (acceptable) Manifestation, namely the historical Shakyamuni Buddha. This view is partly based on the understanding of the reflectivity of the Logos/Will/Mind of God, the primordial Manifestation of Divinity, in creation and through the pure and stainless souls of the Prophets, the Manifestations proper,202 who again reflect their reality in holy souls that would always rise in the wake of the revelation of a new Manifestation, either contemporarily or in the span of their dispensational force field.203 Like the apostles of Christ, Laozi would be a reflection of the Sun of Truth that appeared "in" the (wake of the) Manifestation of the Buddha, who again is the primordial reflection of the Self of God (which again is the primordial Manifestation of the apophatic ultimate "Reality Beyond").204

While such a solution allows us to recognize connections between the accepted (known) Manifestations in the Bahá'í context and many holy figures or sages during the centuries, appearing in relation or in

parallel to these prophetic figures,205 much like the prophetic figures of the Mosaic dispensation (after and under the umbrella of Moses), it is also fraught with several serious problems. First of all, Daoism is older than Buddhism. It cannot without grave limitations be understood to have arisen in the wake of Buddhism.206 At least traditionally, Laozi lived before the Buddha — a problem that this solution shares with the question whether or not Confucius was a Manifestation, who also lived before the Buddha and who traditionally was thought to have visited Laozi and accepted him as his teacher.207 Even if the traditional chronology may not hold up to historical scrutiny, as we may assume that the legendary sage Erh (Laozi) might have lived in the 5th century B.C.E. while the Laozi was created or compiled between the 4th and the 2nd century B.C.E., the main counter argument still remains, namely, that Daoism is older than Buddhism. However, even if this was not the case, we must not forget that Buddhism entered China only at the time of the Han

dynasty between the late 3rd and the 1st century B.C.E., long after both the alleged lifetime of Laozi and the creation of the Dao De Jing.208 We must also take into consideration that it was the Daoist substrate that facilitated the survival of Buddhism in China while it was disappearing in India over the next centuries either by being reappropriated into Hinduism or by being eradicated by Islamic occupation.209 Moreover, it was mediated through Daoism and especially through Laozi and the Laozi that Buddhism developed into new and important branches, which became influential and are still with us today, not only in East Asia, but also in America and Europe (for instance, Chan, Hua Yen, Tian Tai, and other forms of Mahayana Buddhism); and so was Zen enfolding a synthesis with Daoist streams, perpetuating its inherent influence worldwide to this day.210 Hence, the assumption of a movement of influence opposite to the proposed thesis is not only more probable regarding origins and historical development, but also on the symbolic level as Laozi in later Daoism was understood to have been the teacher of the Buddha, and the Buddha was even proclaimed the return of Laozi.211

Thesis 2: Laozi was a sage, transmitting an older Chinese "revelation"

There are, in fact, in Chinese cultural memory indications of mythical figures who have been considered the founders of Chinese culture or even humanity such as the divine Yellow Emperor and the figure of Fu Xi, a legendary emperor and mythological author of the ancient Yi Jing who is considered somewhat similar to the mythological Adam of biblical heritage (which to mythological consciousness also appeared to be historical).212 The reason to think in this way in a Bahá'í perspective would be that, if we rule out thesis 1, namely, that the Buddha is the "origin" and overarching force field for the emergence of Laozi, we might think of Laozi as the mirror or companion of an older Chinese Manifestation of which we have lost record.213 The Bahá'í writings expect that every culture would have had their Manifestations even before the ones known today. In fact, Shoghi Effendi partly justifies his reluctance to widen speculation to other than the recorded figures named in the scriptural Bahá'í writings on this basis: that we have lost knowledge of older dispensations distributed throughout humanity and human pre-history.214 They could, as Bahá'u'lláh says, have been the instigators of humanity's cultural development in these older times, but were living, for instance, before writing could have preserved their memory.215 Hence, it would make sense to postulate such a prophetic figure, which then would be the force field of revelation "in" which Laozi represents another mirror of rejuvenation or exploration.

What may count against this thesis, however, is the overwhelming

evidence that it was not such an ancient figure of the unremembered past, but Laozi himself who was seen as the initiator of (philosophical) Daoism (Dao Jia), and who, in the further development of Daoism as a religion (Dao Jiao) in the first millennium C.E., began prominently to feature as divinity, even as one aspect of the highest Manifestations of ultimate reality in the Daoist understanding.216 This development should give us pause: It is in the figure of Laozi and his book that it is at least questionable that China had not developed any idea of Manifestations of divine "revelation" and produced scriptures of such revelations, because it was precisely with Laozi and the Laozi that, over the coming centuries, the idea of apophatic divinity, divine Manifestations of

ultimate reality and scriptural revelation, have developed.217 In fact, Laozi became the "face," that is, literally the Manifestation of the highest mystery of ultimate reality expressed in the conception of the "Three Pure Ones." Of them, he is the "face" of mystery, himself often represented as holding "the book" (the Laozi) — uncannily mirroring the Bahá'í understanding of the High Prophets or Manifestations as being the "face" of the unknowable Godhead and the ones bringing "the book," that is, not only a new scripture, but the "Law" of the dispensation that decides its pattern of living.218 Not only can the origin of the "Three Pure Ones" be traced back to the Dao De Jing, as it understands the origin of all things to proceed from the apophatic One that becomes Two (Yin, Yang) and then Three (The Three Pure Ones) from which, consequently, all things flow.219 Moreover, within this logic of the Three-One, together with the apophatic One (Yuanshi Tianzun) and the Divine Treasure (Lingbao Tienzun), Laozi appears as "its" third aspect, the quintessence of the Way and Virtue (Daode Tienzun). The "face" of ultimate reality is none other than the divine Spirit of Laozi who, then, is nothing else but the human Manifestation of the Way (the universal Dao, ultimate reality) and all of "its" divine attributes or virtues.220

At this juncture, we may ask: What more and what other (additional) characteristics can we expect a Manifestation to exhibit to be called a Manifestation in a Bahá'í sense than being the very expression of ultimate Reality "in person" and bringing (revealing) "the book," and being considered to have a human and a divine station and nature (rather similar to the development in Christianity,221 maybe even under influence of its Chinese expansion)? But then, contrarily, we can also ask whether there is any evidence that Laozi, or Confucius, for that matter, considered himself, or claimed to be, a Manifestation?222 As a final similarity we may also remember that this divine figure of Laozi, Lord Lao, was considered to undergo a rhythm of human appearances in a progression of

revelations and Manifestations. Like the Reality of Bahá'u'lláh, Krishna and the Buddha, Laozi's Reality (in Daoist scriptures) is understood to have come time and again into the world of humanity, even as the figure of the Buddha (but not confined to it) whom Bahá'ís consider as a genuine Manifestation.223 But then, again, as this cyclical scheme of the divine reality of Lord Lao, appearing in a

figure of another religions, was created under the pressure resisting Buddhist expansionism, it might not create a reliable argument for the cyclicity and return of Manifestations in a Bahá'í understanding either.224 What is more, despite the high station of Lord Lao, later developments in religious Daoism have not confirmed, or rather, shaded, the seeming importance of the divine figure.225

Thesis 3: Laozi was a "possible, but unknowable" Manifestation

Shoghi Effendi's statement that Laozi is "not considered" a Manifestation in the Bahá'í context leaves space for an interpretation that takes into account the seeming conviction of the Guardian to not expand his interpretations of Bahá'í revelation beyond the boundaries of that which the texts actually say or give evidence for in his considerations when answering questions (thesis 2). It is quite often the case that we find in the corpus of Shoghi Effendi's letters (or letters written on his behalf) that he cautions the questioner about that which on any specific issue can actually be known if one takes the Bahá'í scriptural texts as a basis: sometimes nothing can be known, because nothing can be found or inferred regarding a specific question or matter; sometimes the evidence is scarce and caution is necessary not to overstep the boundaries of interpretation into fantasy.226

If we can understand Shoghi Effendi's statement regarding Laozi in this way, it would not mean a denial in principle, but it would rather indicate a factual impossibility to know whether Laozi was or was not a Manifestation since the Bahá'í scriptural sources do not indicate anything in either direction. On this view, all we can say is that the Bahá'í writings do not (as far as we know) mention Laozi either way. But given all the other criteria for discerning a Manifestation, as they eerily apply to Laozi and the Laozi (thesis 2), even if neither is mentioned in the canonical accounts, but since there is virtually no limitation to divine theophanies in the Bahá'í writings,227 Laozi may possibly be a Manifestation or be a "possible" Manifestation. Yet this estimation must remain an open question in the current context, not only because of the silence of Bahá'í scriptures, but rather since we cannot exclude that later

Manifestations could clarify this matter and possibly refer to Laozi as such a Manifestation (thesis 6).

There is not much to say against such a thesis, except that we could ask the question what sense it would make to ponder the existence of a "possible" Manifestation of whom we cannot know factually whether s/he is one or not. I will come back to this question in thesis 5.

Thesis 4: Laozi was no Manifestation, because Laozi did not exist

Shoghi Effendi's statement that Laozi should not be considered a Manifestation could also be understood as one in principle, that is, if it indicates a definitive knowledge that he was not a Manifestation. This would make sense if Laozi did never exist. In fact, more recent research has raised doubts regarding the historical existence of a singular figure named Laozi and, hence, of him being the author of the Dao De Jing. It is rather assumed that he was a "composite figure," crystallizing a whole group of learned scholars of classical Chinese wisdom.228 We know that the Zhou dynasty under which Laozi is assumed to have lived was cultured enough to entertain an imperial library and to employ scholars and scribes, collectors of literature, philosophy, art and law, and who were advisors and guardians of traditional wisdom.229 Like many other anonymous texts, for instance of the Jewish wisdom literature (even the scriptural texts accepted in either the Hebrew Bible or diverse canonical versions of the Christian Old Testament), which are expected to be either collective endeavors of a group or received redactions over time,230 we can reasonably assume a group of scribes, scholars and sages to have collected the ancient Chinese wisdom sayings in a book(or what, over time, became a condensed book) and by attaching it to one of the mythological or faintly historical figures, or still revered notables, remembered in Chinese history and named Laozi (as there are, in fact, more than one such figures related to our composite person Laozi).231 And we know of at least one such school to have been entertained for some time during the fourth century B.C.E. that was capable to either collect the Dao De Jing (or one of its early versions) or hold high its memory without knowing its origins, but accepting some traditional ascription to a mythical sage named Laozi

who in the old sources was assumed to have been the one that Confucius had encountered in the search for some answers regarding the correct performance of ancestral rituals. In this case, we must still accept the acute relevance of the Laozi as a scriptural text of religious Daoism (in which the text unfolded) that Bahá'í should admire or revere, but without any knowable figure as its author. This would not be without precedence in the Bahá'í universe as it also

accepts a Sabean/Sabian “revelation” of which we cannot even say exactly what group it represents (as different groups are indicated in different scriptural contexts), but of which we can definitely say that we have no idea of any founder, mythological or historical.232

Thesis 5: Laozi was an “incognito” Manifestation

Although it is a somewhat strange assumption, at first, that a Manifestation, which should be considered an educator of humanity, could be unknown to his or her contemporaries, there are indications in the Bábi-Bahá’í literatures that such a possibility is not a priori excluded or under all conditions meaningless. A Manifestation might decide not to be known by anyone. This assumption can be traced back to an intriguing Shi‘i theological speculation that there are not only known, but more often even unknown perfectly holy representatives of the Twelfth Imam or the Qa’im in the world233 — almost like the “hidden” (prachanna) Buddhas in Theravada Buddhism.234 In any case, the Báb did assume that it is a Manifestation’s decision if, when, and how to reveal him- or herself to the world, depending on the situation.235 What would happen if such a Manifestation decided not to reveal him- or herself? Would it not imply that this human figure was nevertheless a “hidden” Manifestation236 — because Bahá’í scriptures would not accept any mere assumption scheme such as could also be witnessed in a group of Christian (Ebonite) views that holds that Jesus “became” the Son of God by adoption and exultation?237 And wasn’t any Manifestation before his or her declaration a hidden Manifestation?238

But what could be the meaning of such hiddenness, as it seems to contradict the very reason why a messenger of divine enlightenment, revelation, and education of humanity is sent to appear?239 One reason may be found deeply embedded in the Báb’s and Bahá’u’lláh’s understanding of the nature of a Manifestation. In the words of the

sixth Imam, both the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh repeat in their writings that the essence of divinity consists in (the substance that is) servitude.240 Bahá’u’lláh also describes the divine “station” of the Manifestation in
terms of such servitude, not only “in the court” (the presence) of God in which the Manifestation shows no self (ego) except the Self of God, but even more so in the world in which s/he appears.241 In other words, a Manifestation is a Manifestation regardless of whether s/he appears in the face of witnesses and can be experienced as a divine figure, a messenger or a prophet, or just as a mere human being, in his or her servitude as “merely” human being expressing his or her divinity as perfectly as would appear in any other (super-natural) impressions s/he might leave in the perception and understanding of humanity.242 Laozi might have been such a Manifestation, then, one

of absolute servitude, being anonymous, even incognito.243 However, what counts against such a thesis in the case of Laozi is the fact that his anonymity could not have been absolute since Laozi, in fact, was known not only as a holy figure and sage, but even as a divinity, similar to the Christian development following the experience of Jesus's exultation, explicating itself in the apotheosis of Christ (thesis 2).244

Thesis 6: Laozi was a "Manifestation" of Wisdom

The content of that which Bahá'ís may or may not consider a Manifestation is not as clear-cut as one might think at first glance. The first impression is that Manifestations are identical with the founders of religions, but limited to certain known figures of specific religions, such as the "nine" religions, which Bahá'í writers sometimes assume as "canonical" for the Bahá'í universe,245 namely, that of Sabianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Bábism and the Bahá'í Faith.246 While it is true that Shoghi Effendi mentions those "nine" religions as the "only ones still existing," he also avoids three possible reductionisms: first, that the number "nine" has a literal significance; second, that these are the only (true) religions associated with Manifestations, these Manifestations being the only ones; and, third, that this list is exhaustive of "true" religions.247 In particular, first, the "nine" represents the symbolic number of fullness for the Bahá'í Faith, the Abjad number of the name of Bahá'u'lláh (BHA'), reflecting the

essence of all Manifestations as mirrors of the one Splendor or Glory of God (thesis 7).248 Second, the often (in some combination) together and in association with some of the "nine" religions mentioned Manifestations, such as Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh249 do in no way exhaust the Manifestations mentioned and assumed in the Bahá'í writings.250 Rather, as Shoghi Effendi immediately adds, there have always been Prophets and Messengers.251 In fact, the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá consistently assume an indefinite number of Manifestations.252 Third, as Shoghi Effendi emphasizes, the mentioned religions do not represent the only true religions,253 but — maybe similar to the methodological restraints mentioned thesis 3 — could be understood as the ones existing as mentioned in the Bahá'í writings.254 This also derives from the fact that Bahá'u'lláh
understands all religions to be divine in origin and nature.255

Yet, if one was tempted to assume any of these reductionisms — if the "nine" religions were to be taken literally — the "list" itself would
demonstrates several grave flaws. To name just a few anomalies

visible even from this reductionist outset: it would fail by suggesting that these different religious historical organisms were one (linear) chain of progressive revelations. These “nine” don’t form a simple timeline of progression, but imply parallel developments and crossings. Further, some of these religions are not named after a founder, actually have a founder, or attach to a figure that is the founder of the respective religion; they are religions in very different senses of the word.256 Finally, such a literalism would also miss the symbolic and spiritual character of the named religions as “the only ones existing” and begin to resemble an exclusivist determination of “true” religions. Shoghi Effendi avoids this danger, first, by clarifying that the “nine” should not be used to create the impression “of being all tied up with peculiar religious theories” and, second, by advising Bahá’ís “not … to be rigid in these matters,”257 but rather to
take into account the historical and scholarly discussion on the number and identity of (what should be called) “existing” religions. These are all also important insights in the conversation with Daoism.

Another complication arises if we take a closer look at other figures related to Manifestations, such as the Hebrew prophets, or holy figures in other religions, such as the apostles in Christianity or

the Imams in Shi‘i Islam, as reflected in the Bábi-Bahá’í writings.258 As
not all accepted (known) Manifestations are founders of religions,259 so do not all holy figures appear automatically in a lesser rank than that of Manifestations. It is well known that the Báb began his revelatory writings connected to his declaration as the Gate of the Qa’im, eternalized in his mighty book, the Qayyum al-Asma, by identifying himself symbolically with the figure of the Hebrew patriarch Joseph who according to the Qur’an was considered a High Prophet and one of the most important figures of the Jewish dispensation in Islamic understanding.260 It is also well know that Bahá’u’lláh has, on occasion, identified the Báb with John the Baptizer who as Yahya was also a Qur’anic High Prophet with a book, that is, given Bahá’í criteria, a Manifestation.261 Bahá’u’lláh also identifies the Joseph of the Báb with himself and with the third Shi‘i Imam Husayn ibn ‘Ali, both offering their lives in the wake of divine demonstration of unconditional love (at least in Bahá’u’lláh understanding).262 On occasion, both Joseph and Imam Husayn appear in the same lineup with accepted Manifestations as if they were participating in this elevated station, but maybe only were anonymously manifest as such (Thesis 5).263 In other words, the Bábi-Bahá’í writings know of a host of other (maybe in some sense anonymous) “Manifestations” of the divine besides Manifestations in a technical sense, often named the “holy ones,” appearing in the series

of Imams or the holy family, or in series of Manifestations, or with all their attributes in place of them, or even as identified with a named (known) Manifestation,264 or occasionally name them as Manifestations.265

In this context, it is also remarkable that the Báb in his Tafsir Hadith al-Haqiqat (and other tablets) names Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the wife of the first Shi‘i Imam ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib, the generative principle of all prophets — a function that seems to indicate a “station” that is in some sense even higher than that of the prophets.266 If we take also into account, as Henry Corbin has demonstrated, that the Shaykhi movement, which preceded the Báb and from which he recruited almost all of his early followers and “apostles,” the Letters of the Living, has considered Fatimah as the representation of divine Wisdom, we are in a whole new world of religious and philosophical as well as spiritual connotations.267 Wisdom, hokmah in biblical understanding, indicates not just one

divine attribute among infinitely many others, but is singled out as one of the divine modes of immanence of the transcendent God in the world of creation. In the Hebrew Bible she appears in an elevated position in her function to indicate the presence of God’s Self in the world in the company of similarly elevated terms such as the Name (haShem), the Word (dabar), the Spirit (ruah), the Angel (malek), and Glory (kabod)268 — many of them, individually and collectively, also being used to indicate divine Manifestations in the Bahá’í writings.269 In the biblical context, Wisdom represents, among other things, the aspect of the presence of the unfathomable God as the plan of creation, the wise order and reasonability of creation in the mind of God; God’s luring power, instead of coercive force, in the education of humanity in divine virtues; and the glory of God as she contracts herself in the tent of the covenant and wanders with the people as shekinah.270 It is this Wisdom that the Gospel of John refers to in its famous prologue as the Word (logos) that was in the beginning of all creation, is in all creation, and is God.271 It is the same Wisdom (hikmat) in which Bahá’u’lláh understands the world to be created; that in many of his tablets appears to indicate the nature of the Manifestations; and that allows us to understand creation as divine order and to penetrate its secrets with our mind (as its mirror).272

Nor does divine Wisdom figure only as the inspiration of prophets, but also of the sages and lovers of wisdom, that is, philosophers.273 It is not without merit to point to the fact that in light of Wisdom both of these categories — that of the prophet and of the sage — appear at times fused in past scriptures and the Bahá’í writings. A strong witness to this fusion presents itself in the biblical and intertestamentary Wisdom literature, which is itself not only

viewed as inspired scripture, but highlights Wisdom as divine Spirit and plays the role of inspiration of prophets274 as well as that of the divine dimension, as identified in the figure of Christ.275 Moreover, as part of the Wisdom section of Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Daniel features one of the most influential Jewish prophets as a sage.276 And Bahá'u'lláh identifies the symbolic figure of Hermes Trismegistus as the primordial exponent of philosophy, who was already traditionally thought to be the Jewish patriarch Enoch, the one exalted to God while alive,277 while also being identified with the Islamic prophet Idris.278 This will be further explored in thesis 7.

So, while one could hold that eastern religions tend to not entertain the concept of revelation and prophethood, but rather view their holy figures as sages and their insights as wisdom, one could also make a case that such sages live from the same Wisdom that generates the prophets as divine representatives. In this sense, Laozi could be understood as personification of this same Wisdom that flows through all prophets and holy figures regardless of their station as primal mirrors (thesis 3 and 5) or as mirrors of these mirrors (thesis 1 and 2).279 In this perspective, it would be secondary to what the exact station of Laozi amounts if we accept that the Laozi is such a scripture of wisdom, shining with divine Wisdom (thesis 4); and even more so if we take into account the later Daoist interpretation of both the person and the book as Manifestations of ultimate reality (thesis 2). Yet, perhaps one may counter (and limit this thesis) by the fact that, in the Chinese context, if one does not follow the divinization of Lord Lao, Laozi is more naturally considered as a wisdom teacher than an "incarnation" of Wisdom.

Thesis 7: Laozi is a "symbolic" Manifestation

This thesis is based on the observation, already hinted at, that not all of the Manifestations, named in the Bahá'í writings, are either founders of religions (thesis 6) or, for that matter, even historical figures (thesis 4). This is especially true for Krishna, who is accepted as a genuine Manifestation in the Bahá'í context,280 but is neither a founder of Hinduism nor a historical figure, but probably similar to Laozi (thesis 4) a composite personality.281 There are as many "Krishnas" in the Indian records of old as there are "Laozis" in the Chinese records. Similarly, we find series of Manifestations in Bábi-Bahá'í literatures that include figures such as the biblical Adam and Noah besides the already mentioned ones, and they were already included in the Qur'anic series of prophets leading up to Muhammad.282 Similar to Fu Xi in the Chinese context (thesis 2), it is not difficult to agree that both Adam and Noah are not historical figures, but symbolic representations of the archetypical human condition in relation to (ultimate) reality at earlier stages of human

development and consciousness.283 Nevertheless, if such figures are included in valid lists of Manifestations, we must either conclude that Manifestations do not necessarily have to be historical figures or

that they will always at least have to indicate a great existential symbolism of divine revolution in the history of evolution and civilization.284 In either case, history becomes not obsolete — such as in docetic renderings of the Christ event (recognizing only the archetype, but denying the scandal of particularity, embodiment and historicity)285 — but remains the very intention of this symbolic reality as it emanates from the spiritual realms into their materializations, and repeatedly so.286 In fact, with the return of one Manifestation "in" another one, the whole cyclical and progressive understanding of the symbolic "identity" of all Manifestations as expressions of the one Word, Wisdom, Glory, Mind, Will and Spirit of God becomes only intelligible if we assume such a symbolic reality as a profoundly spiritual Reality, as the very basis for any singular or cyclical or progressive materialization in history.287

Considering the symbolic character of the Manifestation as basis for any historization is not the same as making a mythological statement or transforming the concept of the Manifestation into a mythopoeic statement extracted from past religions. A mythological statement was meant to be (or was factually often misunderstood as) a literal rendering of an event of sacred history within the bounds of the causal connections of this material universe — something we would today consider literalism (thesis 6)288 — even if it looks from a current perspective like a paradigmatic rendering of deep realities. The symbolic character of Reality, however, is related to the fact that the spiritual nature of its meaning cannot be exhausted by material, causal, space-time relations without, in this collapse, in its very meaning becoming irrelevant to them (that is, the literal facts created in such a way have already lost the spiritual meaning). 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with the Sufi tradition, speaks of the higher spiritual realm of the Kingdom (malakut) sometimes in terms of the realm of similitudes (alam al-mithal), the realm of symbols, meanings, similarities, images, and significances, which are aspects of a higher reality than the fleeing causal realm of impermanence, but which are mutually immanent with and must be materialized and historicized at the plane of the physical, historical, temporal, spatial and bodily world.289 He also relates many doctrines of past religions to have been misunderstood as "mythological" truths, that is, as literal renderings of spiritual realities by confounding them with happenings of this causal realm of the physical universe. Instead, these stories of sacred

history were, so 'Abdu'l-Bahá, always meant to convey symbolic

patterns of spiritual realities in the midst, but not of the stuff, of physical realities.290 It is their symbolism, not their mythopoetic confusion, which transports religious truths through symbols, myths, tales, which, in their spiritual nature, have the power to connect us with the divine revelation of Reality, or rather are the emanations of this Reality into the world of creation.

A good example of this difference between mythic illusion and symbolic meaning, or spiritual reality, in the Bahá'í writings is the appearance of Hermes Trismegistus and "his" writings, the Corpus Hermeticum, in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Wisdom (Lawh-i-Hikmat). Hermes is, according to contemporary historical readings, (like Laozi) considered a composite figure, not a historical person (thesis 4) — although sometimes (mythopoetic, literalist) historicity was assumed, as in the Renaissance. Like Krishna and Laozi, he "manifests" at different times in history, collecting himself to, and collectively emanating, characteristics of an archetypical figure of (philosophic) wisdom and of divine revelation. He represents the Egyptian God Thoth, the originator of scripture and language, and the Greek Hermes, the messenger of the revelations of the Greece pantheon, but also the Hebrew and Jewish figure of Enoch, who was supposed to have been assumed into the divine realm while alive. Hermes/Thoth/Enoch later also lent "their" name to this culminating Corpus, of scriptural and para-scriptural texts of apocalyptic nature,291 carrying "his" name, and advanced par excellence to the figure through whose mystical ascent into the presence of God its secrets were authorized.292 And, finally, in Islamic lore "he" became identified with the mysterious Qur'anic prophet Idris who was also already equated with the biblical Enoch (thesis 6).293 The Corpus Hermeticum is, of course, not an ancient text of those pre-historical figures, but was probably accumulated not earlier than the 1st century C.E., although the ascription to Hermes and Enoch lets it appear to have been created at the beginning of human civilization. Its enormous impact was not only due to its assumed old age and the authorship of this presumably exceptional holy figure of divine origin or touch, but can also be explained by the variability with which the presumed authorship (and authority) could be identified with figures from different cultures, embracing a divinity, a prophet, a philosopher, and a revealer of divine truth in its sphere.294

Comparing Laozi with Hermes, at this point, we can decide to dissolve Laozi like Hermes/Enoch/Idris into irrelevant clouds of mythological confusion or view them as actual philosophers, or actual prophets of old, or, conversely, in the contemporary climate of "demythologization," as imaginations based on a fraud of a later generation ascribing an old name with authority to a respective corpus of writings that, nevertheless, stun us even today because of

their beauty and depth of insight. Over against all of these potential solutions, we could also decide to follow Bahá'u'lláh's view of Hermes and understand Laozi, like Hermes/Enoch/Idris, as such a symbolic "Manifestation" of an ideal prophet-philosopher, educator, and revealer of Wisdom — conveying spiritual archetypical Reality regardless of the folds that formed the cooperate identity of the figure through which this reality shines as Sun of Truth (thesis 3 and 6).

Furthermore, the fused figure of a prophet-philosopher (thesis 6), whether symbolic or historical (or at least as perceived in sacred history), is not an unusual category of human societies to understand their extraordinary figures to be relevant across diverse cultures. Historical figures like Pythagoras were considered not only philosophers (and scientists), but spiritual giants, gathering religious communities among themselves, being quintessential human beings, incarnations of Wisdom and knowledge, and even divine figures. So could the Roman poet Ovid divinize Pythagoras as all-knowing sage of universal, super-mundane wisdom.295 Insofar as other philosophers are understood — traditionally in Islam and also by Bahá'u'lláh — spiritually to have gained their wisdom from the prophets, such as Pythagoras from disciples of Salomon, for instance,296 and vive versa, and insofar as such philosophers can be understood as being inspired, as Bahá'u'lláh suggests for Socrates,297 we can discern the same pattern: Wisdom flows from divine Wisdom that/who in all prophets constitutes their "person," who, therefore, are her highest incarnations, but of a Wisdom that/who also distributes herself among (or is being mirrored in) other extraordinary figures of holiness, mystical insight (irfan), philosophical reason and spiritual wisdom. Laozi, considered as divine personification of Wisdom, is no exception — whether he was a composite personality, a (symbolic or historical) divine mirror, a holy sage or Wisdom's "Manifestation."

Thesis 8: Laozi's station is (now) irrelevant

As with every Manifestation in the context of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation we can, on this view, assume that they all have been integrated in their greatness into the greatness of Bahá'u'lláh who is called a "universal Manifestation," unprecedented in human history on earth until now (and maybe never seen before even in unrecorded human pre-history).298 Consequently, whatever the exact station of anyone of any dispensation — even if such a station seem to lower from one dispensation to another, as in the case of John the Baptizer, or changes into divinity over time, as in the case of Krishna, the Buddha, Jesus, and Laozi (thesis 6)299 — has become irrelevant in light of the newest Manifestation; the past has been made new.300 It is in line with this pattern of thought that the Báb, the more he gradually

revealed his claim to that of a Manifestation, also granted outrageously grades of divinity to his disciples,301 while Bahá'u'lláh, conversely, by his declaration to be the coming of the One God Shell Make Manifest (man yaziruhu'llah) — whom the Báb expected being even greater as the Bab himself,302 the Manifestation in which all religions flow together (again) — resumed all distributed divinity back into the singular universal event of his appearance. It is in this event that the whole world was created anew by a divine infusion with all the divine attributes, with grace, mercy, forgiveness, and renewal.303 Symbolically, that is, considered as spiritual reality (thesis 7), with the coming of a new Manifestation all creatures expire, are inhaled, as it were, and are, out of this moment of divine inhalation of the Spirit and into silence, exhaled again, recreated. Through this event, all reality is being born again into a new process that erases all ancient stations and recreates them anew in unexpected ways into unprecedented forms.304 If in the new revelation on the spiritual level only the "face" of God remains, that is, the primordial Manifestation resuming all reality, then its symbolic re-presentation is always such that it does not matter what anyone's station was before its new appearance, except it is newly defined by its relation to this novel event by which all is recreated.305 All stations, even of all past Manifestations, are, therefore, in a sense redefined by the new event of a universal Manifestation. On this view, it does not really matter what station Laozi has had.306 It is in the connection that one finds to Bahá'u'lláh in which one may also find Laozi's relevance today, reverberating through his Dao De Jing in new splendor. "Now is the

time," says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "when we restrict our discussion to the Most Great Luminary of Peace and Salvation in the Age, to talk of the Blessed Perfection and to voice His exhortations, behests and teachings. … [The] sovereignty [of former Manifestation] in this world is ended and their cycle is completed" [SWAB 469].

11. The Dao of Bahá

In conclusion, what is the challenge of Laozi and the Dao De Jing for the Bahá'í universe of discourse? Sure, we might have enough to work through with the host of diverse correspondences and differences in detail as developed up to this point — such as the resonances in the understanding of the unmanifest and hidden as well as the manifest and creative ultimate divine reality; the relativity of (religious) truths; the striving for education and perfection of human potential in light of this ultimate reality and its exemplars; the effort to liberate us from empty repetition of traditions and manipulations of social and psychological dependences; the mutual resonances of the respective Manifestations of Reality/ Dao in wise and prophetic figures; and the effort to reform human society in light of the whole of humanity and with universal peace as aim, among others. Yet, a

maybe even deeper dimension of fruitful cross-pollination may come to light only if we reformulate the assumption regarding the unity of religions, which was underlying the whole conversation all along, namely: in form of a reflection on the one universal Dao of all religions as the Dao of bahá, of the latest Manifestation of the Dao, of ultimate Reality in "person."

If the many books and reflections beginning with "the Dao of…"307 have brought something to light, then it is the insistence on a certain shift of our perception of reality as a whole, a shift of the worldview, the cosmology that is more often than not tacitly presupposed in our day by day evaluation of our lives and in some sense or another underlies any philosophical and religious discourse, and so also the ones reflected on here. The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has made this insight the basis of his philosophical investigations308 so that by knitting together the major spheres of thought (science, religion and philosophy)309 he could programmatically proclaim: "Science suggested a cosmology; and whatever suggests a cosmology, suggest a religion."310 The emphasis in

such a correlation and mutual induction of these spheres on the level of a cosmology, whether implicit or as a reflected worldview of any scientific and religious discourse and their mutual integrations, is to recognize not only the unity of humanity and religions (with its/their Manifestations) in the unity of God. The true nature of unity as envisioned by the Dao of Laozi and the Dao De Jing is of encompassing cosmological breadth that intends nothing less than the unity of the whole "body of the world"311 as pervaded by the one divine Spirit that vivifies the universe in a process of the emergence of mind and the various evolutionary harmonizations of its members throughout all of its spheres and layers of existence.312 The Dao, then, translated in Bahá'í terms, is this all-embracing and all-pervading Reality of the Spirit, the working of its essence in all of nature, including elementary particles, living beings and humanity.313 This one Spirit pervades the All of cosmic reality.314 To see in the diversity of cosmic existence this unity of beauty and the evolving force of unification315 is to feel or see or experience or perceive or inherit the unseen and unnamed Dao/Reality, and is to become a mirror of its all-pervasive working.316 Human perfection, then, lies not in the flight from the world of nature, but in the realization of all divine attributes, which are seeking realization in all of existence,317 not only among humanity and society, but also in all of nature, our precious Earth and the cosmos as a whole. The Dao is this inner nature (ziran) that unites all of existence, physical and mental, subjective and objective, individual and collective, personal and social, visible and invisible, sacred and profane, material and spiritual, and is always already present and at work in the process of

becoming, the becoming of new worlds and new spiritual beings, even beyond humanity.318 Yet, of course, as practitioners of Daoism can and will claim their own understanding of these matter, historically, philosophically, and religiously — and especially in the context of Chinese self-identity, which does not so much discern between the “Three Traditions” than identify with them — these references for a contemporary Bahá’í perception, reception and dialogue will remain in flux.319

It is, then, in this wide view of cosmic unity in which the Dao of Laozi reclaims a “face” in the “Dao” of Bahá’u’lláh. In this universal,
evolutionary, ecological Dao, universal Reality (the primal Manifestation of the apophatic Reality/God/Truth) becomes, indeed,

relative in all of its happenings and truths/daos far beyond particular religions, even particular spiritual beings, such as humanity; it becomes relative to all sentient beings beyond humanity (as in Buddhism); and it becomes implicitly always already related to the whole of existence as one process of divine Reality or Realization.320 In this universal ecological model of unity, the Dao speaks for all beings and in all beings with one voice, a univocity of infinitely many voices.321 In a pluralism of all beings on their respective levels of intensity of the flow of the one Most Great Spirit,322 “its” Manifestations give voice to this univocity “in person.”323

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Cf. Ninian Smart, The World’s Religions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, chs. 1, 3.

Cf. Arvind Sharma, A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion. Dordrecht, NL: Springer 2006, 1-32.

Cf. Eva Wong, Taoism: An Essential Guide. Boston: Shambala, 1997, ch. 1.

As we will see later, in section 10, this claim must be relativized in relation to its historical accuracy, as it the circumstances for the identity the person and the becoming of the book are quote complicated.

Cf. Alan Watts, What is Dao? Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000, 36.

Cf. Dann May, “The Bahá’í Principle of Religious Unity,” in Jack McLean,
ed., Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá’í Theology. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 1-36.

Although a wider shamanic religiosity may have been pervasive throughout the different pre-historic cultural areas, the emergence of Chinese religions or Daoic religiosity is not in any direct way dependent on the Indian and South Asian or Dharmic traditions and in its origins and further developments always demonstrates its own unique characteristics. Nevertheless, in the later confluence of these streams of religious

universes diverse daoic schools and religious expressions, Daoism among them, with Indian Buddhism has led to transferences of categories and mutual synergies such as have contributed to the appearance of Chan and Zen Buddhism and other confluences of the Dao with philosophical and religious connotations in these encounters. Cf. Ray Grigg, The Tao of Zen. Edison, NJ: Alva Press, 1994. More will be said in sections 8 and 10.
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Cf. Moojan Momen, "A Bahá'í Approach to Other Religions: The Example of Buddhism," in Moojan Momen, ed., The Bahá'í Faith and the World's Religions. Oxford: George Ronald, 2003, 167-188.
Cf. Seena Fazel, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations," in Jack McLean, ed., Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 137-152. This integration must, as all other unifications in the context of the understanding of "unity" in the Bahá'í writings, be seen in the tension
between indelible uniqueness (ʻahad) and inclusiveness (wahid); cf. Rhett Diessner, Psyche and Eros: Bahá'í Studies in a Spiritual Psychology. Oxford: George Ronald, 2007, ch. 1. This oscillation between uniqueness and embracing unification is also enshrined in Shoghi Effendi's two formulations: first, "unity in diversity," which must not ever be mis-understood as uniformity, and second, the "complementarity" of religions in their contribution to the one history of religions; but even more so in the fact that the one religion, of which the Bahá'í Faith understands itself
as a part, is an ongoing, always self-transcending process beyond any religion, even the Bahá'í Faith. Cf. Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. Wilmette: IL, Bahá'í Publishing, 1993, sections "Unity in
Diversity" and "Fundamental Principle of Religious Truth." For the philosophical and transreligious implications, cf. Roland Faber, The Divine Manifold. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014, passim.
Cf. ʻAbdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks: Addresses Given by ʻAbdu'l-Bahá in 1911.
Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2011, #14.
This will have a great deal to do with the mystical consciousness that unites us with the unknowable mystery beyond; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys. Translated by Marzieh Gail. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1991, 91. In the Fourth Valley (of the Four Valleys) we read: "If the mystic knowers be of those who have reached to the beauty of the Beloved One (Mahbúb), this station is the apex
of consciousness and the secret of divine guidance." This consciousness will also lead us into the heart of the Dao De Jing.
Cf. Phyllis Chew, The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith. Oxford: George Ronald, 1993.

Cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963. While this influence of the Dao de Jing has created worldwide presence, this article will, of course, not claim to understand the historical situation of its becoming and transmission, especially in China and throughout Chinese culture and the "Chinese religions," but will especially take into account the scholarly engagement with it, its history and becoming, as well as its contemporary interpretations in light of interreligious and cross-cultural philosophical discourses, which have taken place after its western academic reception,

but also the contemporary interreligious interest accompanying the interest in its content and meaning.

Bahá'u'lláh uses the term haykal as embodiment of divine presence, which can assume the form of a literal or symbolic temple, the human body; or it indicates the heart, which is the place of divine revelation and presence in creatures. Revelation can, therefore, take the form of an embodied person or/and a "book," that is, the prophet and his or her book. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh,
Days of Remembrance: Selections from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh for the Bahá'í Holy Days. Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 2016, #40:6: "O night
of the All-Bountiful! In thee do We verily behold the Mother Book. Is it a Book, in truth, or rather a child begotten?"

Regarding such a transreligious notion of "revelation," cf. Keith Ward, Religion and Revelation. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, parts 2 and 3.

The term "Big Five" has come into use as many introductions of religion or investigations into specific religious matters related to "world religions" have often reduced their view, or concentrated on, these five religions, often to the exception of other traditions. While the Bahá'í writings firmly add Zoroastrianism and the mysterious Sabian/Sabaean religion(s), some introductions widen their horizon to Jainism and Sikhism or, in rare cases, even to the Bahá'í Faith. Cf. George Chryssides and Ron Geaves, The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods. London: Bloomsbury, 2007, ch. 3.

Cf. Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing, 1970, 94-96; Christopher Buck, "A Unique Eschatological Interface: Bahá'u'lláh and
Cross-Cultural Messianism," in Peter Smith, ed., In Iran: Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History. Vol. 3. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986, 157-180.

While section 10 of this article will wrestle with this questions, it should be clear from the outset that answering this question either in the affirmative or negative would not have any influence on the value of Daoism, Laozi, and the Dao De Jing as philosophical and religious entities, or better, a living organism and its importance for the future of religions in their philosophical and religious expressions. However, as will

be seen later, I will not even intend to “answer” this question in any simple way, but rather take the uniqueness of their contributions to world-philosophies and –religions as a mirror for differentiating the question and harvesting the insights gained by doing so for the Bahá’í universe of discourse. Hence, my title-question, whether Laozi is a “lost prophet” must not be misunderstood as presupposing that he necessarily is a prophet (in anyone’s eyes), but as a question that addresses the interest of the Bahá’í concept of the Manifestation of God in the context of another religion. While it may be true that such a claim—to prophethood—is not an inherent necessity or even a real possibility in the context of eastern religions, it should, therefore, not be summed that the

Abrahamic institution and notion of “prophethood” is merely applied by asking this question. Rather, if we substitute, as the reverse is sometimes the case in Bahá’í parlor, the word “prophet” with Manifestation (mazhar-
i ilahi), we immediately have left this limitation.

Of course, in the first place, the engagement with Daoism, as with any other religion, in the Bahá’í context is a fascinating and rewarding quest and an imperative, given the presupposition of the Bahá’í axiom of the unity of all religions. Yet, as imperative, it is always also a challenge as the
details of such a “unity” will be of revealing and enriching nature, even if
we might not immediately “see” how differences and unison are to be understood or (in an intellectually satisfying and spiritually gratifying way) achieved. It is in this sense, that the Bahá’í imperative of unity is an
even stronger impulse to reflection than the usual interreligious engagements of comparative religion, comparative theology, or interreligious dialogues; cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures—An Extended Version. New York: Orbis Books, 2016.

In general, the different magnitudes of the presence of diverse religions in the Bahá’í writings must be understood from the historical fact and hermeneutical principle of the (historical and geographical) “location” of any event, such as a new religion, like the Bábi-Bahá’í religions, as it will
harbor inherent limitations of access and understanding of hearers and listeners to its new revelation in any given context. As Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá explain, their references to divers religions were not only related to the ability of their audience to understand, but also by the religious adherence and context of questions and questioners present and inquiring, which/whom they often answered with their books, tablets and letters. This is also a liberating insight, as it is not the limitations of the

Manifestations that define the language and references they use to explain their revelations, but the limitations of the time and place in which they appear; hence, the meaning of their teachings and the categories they use must not be reduced to these contexts either, but can and must be translated into new contexts; cf. Momen, “Bahá’í Approach,” in Momen, Bahá’í Faith, 167-188.

The one specific reference of Shoghi Effendi to Laozi and how to understand him in the Bahá’í context will become the driving impulse of section 10 where it is quoted, and the analysis of which will take up all of the latter third of this article.

It should be mentioned at this point that the references of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá to Chinese religion or religions (such as Buddhism and Confucianism) can and should also be understood as signifying and, hence, implying Daoism so that they are relevant to its discussion. This is even more so of importance as in the Chinese context, as we will see later, the

differentiation between the religious traditions, especially Daoism, Confucianism, Chinese forms of Buddhism, and the so called “folk religion,” are less of importance than the Chinese identity that they together express in their relation to China as unified, or confluent, spiritual heritage.

With the sparse sources in this regard, we are in a similar situation as with considerations regarding the possibility of Native American “prophets” or Manifestations; cf. Christopher Buck, “Native Messengers of God in Canada? A test case for Bahá’í universalism,” in The Bahá’í Studies Review
6 (1996): 97-133; C. Buck, “Bahá’í Universalism and Native Prophets,” in
Seena Fazel and John Danesh, eds., Reason and Revelation: New Directions in Bahá’í Thought. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2002, 173-201.

This caveat holds all the more in light of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that all
religions are not just creatures of human imagination, but of divine revelation; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh.
Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1976, #111. One might also think of the religion of the Sabians/Sabeans, of which we do not only not know any founder, but of which we also cannot even be sure what group it identifies (many are suggested in historical research). What is even more, in Islamic interreligious discourses, their name functions often as means to integrate other religions, such as Buddhism, into the sphere of divine guidance. Cf. Christopher Buck, “The Identity of the Sabi’un: An Historical Quest,” in The Muslim World 74:3-4 (1984): 172-186.

Cf. SAQ #43.

Shoghi Effendi has clarified that Confucius is not signified a

Manifestation by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; cf. Helen Bassett Hornby, Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference File. New Deli: Bahá’í Publishing, 2010, #1685. Yet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Questions, #43, in the same section, states Confucius together with the Buddha as claimed by “worshipers,” which would suggest a religion, not an ethics. And in another context, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions Confucius in one series of names together with only other founders of religions such that Confucius would be the only one captured by the term “blessed souls,” which binds all of them together, to be (grammatically oddly) excluded from the series. Besides, although not authoritative, pilgrim notes exist in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá answers the question whether Confucius was a Manifestation affirmatively. But the point, here, is not to decide whether there are conflictual statements or to establish a hermeneutics that would resolve such questions on a chain of authority, but to hint at the fact that these questions need not necessarily be answered with the most simple explanations; rather, they are worth to be thought through in their ambivalences, complexities, and hidden folds, as section 10 will attempt.

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The other equally important person and text being (the) Zhuhangzi (the person and the book) to which I will not refer here further, but who/which would be important to add to complete the picture or, at least, to see the development of (philosophical) Daoism more clearly and fully. Cf. Burton Watson, The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968; Victor Mair, Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994. Resent research also indicates that there may be even older texts on which both the Dao De Jing on which might depend; cf. Harold Roth, Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism. NY: Columbia University Press, 2004. The textual history of Daoism is more complicated, as it comprises a whole universe of texts that, later, were understood as scriptural basis of religious Daoist identity. And it cannot be claimed that any of the early texts has already settled into a fixed identity by which it would be possible anachronistically to differentiate diverse religions as mutually stable identities. They are rather differentiating “schools” of thought, spirituality, and ceremonials, more than (independent or mutually exclusive) religions; cf. Livia Kohn, The God of Dao: Lord Lao in History and Myth. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000, chs. 1-2.

This approach, one of possibilities, or a multiplicity of potential answers, is not only meant to address the question directed toward Laozi alone, but rather to open a space in which complex considerations regarding the Bahá’í concept of the Manifestations of God in relation to all religions can be raised and pondered, but, here, as triggered by the unique profile of Daoism, especially in the mirror of the Dao De Jing and the figure of Laozi, that otherwise might not easily come to the surface or could go

unreflected. For a similar, but much wider field of considerations regarding the concept of Manifestation in light of a multiplicity of religions, cf. R. Faber, The Garden of Reality: Transreligious Relativity in a World of Becoming. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018, ch. 7-8.
Cf. Wong, Taoism, chs. 1-3. For early forms and groups, cf. Gil Raz, The Emergence of Daoism: Creation of Tradition, New York: Routledge, 2011.
Cf. Terry Kleeman, Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities, Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016.
Cf. Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Georg Herrmann, eds., Plato and the Poets. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
Cf. J. J. Clarke, The Tao of the West: Western Transformation of Taoist Thought. New York: Routledge, 2000, ch. 3.
Cf. Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber, The Shambala Dictionary of Taoism. Translated by Werner Wünsche. Boston, MA: Shambala, 1996, 176.

Cf. John Blofeld, Taoism: The Road to Immortality. Boston, MA: Shambala, 2000, chs. 5-7.
Cf. Isabelle Robinet, Taoism: Growth of a Religion. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, 1-24. As we will se later, the same is true for the entanglement of Daoist schools and strains with that of Confucian and Buddhist provenience, philosophically as well as religiously, which created a fascinating rhizome of interactions and mutual coinherences.
Cf. Wilfred C. Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, chs. 2-3. Smith has demonstrated that for the study of religion the term religion is a fairly new and late term, used to categorize mostly western sensitivities on the basis of the Enlightenment and modern secular differentiations of spheres of living such as culture, society, economy, and so on. It was also used to imperialistically capture other spiritual paths either for missionary reasons or subordination under a specific tradition, preeminently Christianity, as the peak and essence of religion. Many scholars have, therefore, tried to avoid this term as description of spiritual ways in order to withhold its prejudicial prescriptive implications as well as the unspoken presupposition that there is an already defined essence of religion(s) that needs only to be applied while, in fact, it was gathered from a specific tradition and projected onto others. Cf. John Cobb, “Some Whiteheadian Assumptions about Religion and Pluralism,” in David Griffin, ed., Deep Religious Pluralism. Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2005, ch. 12. Exceptions, however, arise historically with Manichaeism and Islam, as both of them use the term religion (din) self-reflectively; cf. Smith, Meaning, ch. 4. For Bahá’u’lláh’s reconceptualization of “religion” in light of this Islamic and
pre-Islamic stream from its much more spiritual origin in Zoroastrian texts, cf. Kamran Ekbal, “Daéna-Dén-Dín: The Zoroastrian Heritage of

the ‘Maid of Heaven’ in the Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh,” in Moojan Momen,
ed.,Scripture and Revelation: Papers presented at the First Irfan Colloquium, Oxford: George Ronald, 1997.
The relation between religion and philosophy is an ancient problem and widely discussed where “revelation” becomes the discerning mark of religions. But if we change our perspective and seek the transformative character of a teaching, as ancient Greek philosophy did (versus a purely intellectual endeavor), we will find the difference harder to establish. Ancient philosophers were sages, as sages were often religious figures, as for instance evidenced by Pythagoras. Hence Laozi was not considered merely an intellectual figure, but a transformative force of living a spiritual life. Cf. Yu-Lan Fung, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy: A Systematic Account of Chinese Thought from its Origins to the Present Day. NY: Free Press, 1948, chs. 1-2. For further discussion, cf. section 10. Laozi: A Lost Prophet?

Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, #132; Seena Fazel, “Religious Pluralism and the
Bahá’í Faith,” in Interreligious Insight 1:3 (2003): 42- 49.
It would seem that this approach is a natural implication and extension of Shoghi Effendi’s insight that the oneness of religions does not hinder their differences in the sense of a relational complementarity; Cf. Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1996, #I. For such a complementarity to be actually of some value, it can only evoke insights if the content brought into complimentary conversation is not already a priori known and included in one’s own horizon, such that even the assumed “completeness” of one’s own scriptures and wisdom path does not reveal such insights if they are not accepted as a gift of that particular tradition—as an aspect of truth that in fact adds to insight; cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, #15. This is a major problem in interreligious discourses, related to the differentiation between certain forms of inclusivism (that my truth supersedes and fulfills all others) and pluralism (that there is mutual enrichment); cf. Raimon Panikkar, The Intra-Religious Dialogue. New York: Paulist Press, 1999.
The later development of Daoism, however, will in some sense open up to the idea of “revelation,” for instance, in the movement of Zhang Daoling of the second century C.E., who claimed to have received revelations from Laozi, and on which revelations the important sect of the Celestial Masters is based; cf. Clarke, Tao, 33; Fischer-Schreiber, Dictionary, 9-10; Robinet, Taoism, ch. 3.
Chew, Religions, 196.
Yet, it is in no way clear that these categories, that of the philosopher, the sage, the holy figure, and the prophet, cannot also intersect in a west-Asian (Abrahamic) context. Pythagoras, for instance, was, in his time, rather a religious leader than a philosopher in the modern sense. Note that

Bahá'u'lláh in his Tablet of Wisdom considers Apollonius of Tyana, who seem to have been received as a holy figure in his time, even as a counter-example to Jesus, as a Greek messiah of sort, rather than a philosopher; cf. Keven Brown, "Hermes Trismegistos and Apollonius of Tyana in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh." In Jack McLean, ed., Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá'í Theology. Studies in the Bábi and Bahá'í Religions. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 153-188. And Bahá'u'lláh even mentions Hermes Trismegistos, who in Islamic lore was already identified with the Qur'anic prophet Idris, and the Hebrew patriarch Enoch, as the originator of philosophy; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i Aqdas. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1994, 148n3. And then there is Socrates, whom Bahá'u'lláh not only mentions as an exceptional philosopher, but as a divinely inspired holy man of Truth; ibid, 147—as

there is also a long tradition that seems to imply the worthiness of Socrates to compared with Jesus. More is said in section 10.

Yet, in this sense, the sage is the representation of perfect humanity; cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, Source Book, 761. Hence, the sage seems to embody ideals of the "revelation" of ultimate rightness in the cosmos as a whole, not unlike certain prophetic figures in the west-Asian religions of Abrahamic flavor as well as the "Perfect Man" tradition in diverse Jewish, Gnostic, Christian, and Islamic philosophical speculations; cf. Frederick Borsch, The Son of Man in Myth and History. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967, chs. 2-6; Henry Corbin, Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, 131-133. Here again seems to appear a transreligious connection to the Bahá'í notion of Manifestation (mazhar-i Ilahi); cf. Juan Ricardo Cole, "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings," in Bahá'í Studies 9 (1982) @ http://bahai-library.com/cole_concept_manifestation.

Cf. Chew, Religions, 82-83.

Cf. Wong, Taoism, 31-37.

Cf. Wong, Taoism, 37-41; Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, ch. 24.

Cf. Kohn, God, passim. With the divinization of Laozi in the late Han dynasty—Robinet, Taoism, xviv fixes the date at 166 C.E.—Laozi is depicted as creator of the universe, and he is elevated to the highest depiction of ultimate reality by being admitted into it in the form of the Three Pure Ones; cf.; Clarke, Tao, 67-68; Blofeld, Taoism, 95; Taoism, Isabelle Robinet, Taoist Meditation: The Mao-Shan Tradition of Great Purity. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993, ch. 6. See further discussion in section 10.

Cf. Faber, Garden, Prologue, chs. 3, 8; John Walbridge, The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001.

If we compare the Dao less with the particulars of the Greek, Jewish, and Christian Logos tradition, which leans itself more to controlled order, even if it is related to reason, as in Stoicism and Philo of Alexandria, but with the Wisdom tradition as represented with the biblical and intertestamentary books of Proverbs(ch. 8) or Wisdom of Salomon(ch. 7), we may begin to understand better the existing subliminal transreligious relations between east and west, that is, the prophetic and wisdom oriented religions, as Wisdom operates by attraction, not by force, not even that of logic, and as Wisdom embodies itself in the sages as well as in the prophets; cf. Larry W. Hurtado, One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism. London: Bloomsbury, 2015, ch. 2; James D. G. Dunn, Christology in the Making: A New Testament

Inquiry into the Origins of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996, chs. 6-7. See further discussions in section 10.
Cf. Thomas Cleary, The Essential Tao: An Introduction into the Heart of Taoism through the Authentic Tao De Ching and the Inner Teachings of Chuang Tzu. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991, ch. 1. This is also in line with the fact that early Chinese religion(s) were differentiated more in terms of schools than denominations, and important texts were often shared between all of them, although their value in those schools might have been different.
Cf. Wong, Taoism, ch. 6.
Alan Watts, What is Tao? Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000, 37-38.
Cf. Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 68-71.
Cf. Chan, Source Book, chs. 6-7. That this is not just a western interpretation of the Dao can be witnessed by the considerations of the Chinese scholar Meijun Wang, “Conviviality with Dao: A Chinese Perspective,” in Roland Faber and Santiago Slabodsky, eds., Living Traditions and Universal Conviviality: Prospects and Challenges for Peace in Multireligious Communities. Edited by. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016, 67-78.
Cf. Fung, History, 97; Robinet, Taoism, 26.
Cf. Chad Hansen, A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, ch. 6.
Cf. Blofeld, Taoism, 1-19; Watts, Tao, 41-41.
Cf. Chan, Source Book, 136-137.
Cf. Robinet, Meditation, 42-48.
Cf. Fung, Source Book, 94-97; Cf. Phyllis Chew, “The Great Tao,” in The Journal of Bahá’í Studies 4:2 (1991): 11-39.
Jonathan Star, Tao Te Ching: The Definite Edition. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2001, #1.
Cf. Rob Stockman, The Bahá’í Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, ch. 3.

Cf. Stephen Lambden, Introduction to The Lawh-i haqq/Lawh al-Haqq (Tablet of Truth/True One/Ultimately Real...) @ http://hurqalya.ucmerced.edu/node/378/.

Instead of setting up the world in opposites (in permanent conceptual strive for superiority), the Dao categorizes everything fluently as contrasts in mutual immanence and of a flow into one another; cf. Clarke, Tao, ch. 8. The unknowability and essential hiddenness of the Dao, even to the extent to call it “nothing” (wu) or “true nothingness” (zhen wu)—cf.

Robinet, Taoism, 194-195—is a great example of non-dual thinking, which also characterizes Bahá’u’lláh’s understanding of Reality (al-haqq) beyond differentiations of theism and monism, but also beyond even the simple opposition between being and nothingness; cf. Roland Faber, “Baha'u'llah and the Luminous Mind: Baha'i Gloss on a Buddhist Puzzle,” in Lights of Irfan 18 (2017): 53-106.

For more conversation between the mystical dimension of the Dao, its activation in the multiplicity of the world(s) and our Selves, and the Bahá’í writings; cf. Faber, Garden, ch. 3.

In the reflection of Chinese history of thought and culture, one might even say that without the Dao De Jing, the authorship of which is credited to the legendary Laozi, Chinese civilization would not have been the same or dramatically different; cf. Chan, Source Book, 136.

Cf. Olivia Kohn and Michael LaFargue, eds., Lao-Tzu and the Tao-Te-Ching. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, chs. 1-3.

Laozi is a title rather than a name, meaning Old Master. It may refer to a wise man with the name (Li) Erh and also, in Daoist and Confucian literature, Lao Tan; cf. Chen, Tao Te Ching, 6-10.

Cf. Ellen Chen, The Tao De Ching: A New Translation with Commentary. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1989, 6-18.

Cf. Fischer-Schreiber, Dictionary, 88-90; Robinet, Taoism, 19, 26.

Cf. Chen, Tao De Ching, 16-17; Chew, Religions, 24-25; Fischer-Schreiber, Dictionary, 89.

Cf. Jaspers, Karl, The Great Philosophers, Vol. 2: The Original Thinkers: Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plotinus, Lao-tzu, Nagarjuna. Edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966. Jaspers adds also Zhuangzi, Liezi, Elijah, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah, Homer, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, among others, to the axial list, indicating this awakening to be one especially of consciousness, not of narrow religious (revelatory) or even only western emergences; cf. Karl Jaspers, The Origin and Goal of History. New York: Routledge, 2010, 8, 278-279 n5 (of p. 53), ch. 5.

This mutual interference and development of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism is known as the “3 Traditions” approach; cf. Clarke, Tao, 22-28.

Cf. Diane Morgan, The Best Guide to Eastern Philosophy and Religion. New York: renaissance Books, 2001, 223; C. Alexander and Annellen Simpkins, Simple Taoism: A Guide to Living in Balance. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1999, 11.
Cf. Fischer-Schreiber, Dictionary, 56-57, 90; Morgan, Guide, 225.
This extraordinary crossing of lines by Bahá'u'lláh was not totally unknown in other religious contexts. One may think of the integration of Laozi: A Lost Prophet?
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the Zoroastrian king Cyrus as Jewish Messiah in Isaiah 45 into Jewish salvation history; or the "Old Testament," integrating the Jewish Hebrew Bible into Christian scripture; or the critical confluence of Islam and Hinduism in Sikhism. But the maybe closest predecessor of the idea of multi-religious prophethood was the figure of Mani whose movement became a "world religion" stretching from the Levant to China and Japan for over a thousand years before Bahá'u'lláh claimed the integration of all
religions and to be the "return" of all Manifestations of the past in his prophethood; cf. Buck, "Interface," 157-160. I fact, Mani claimed to be the return not only of Jesus, but also that of Zoroaster and the Buddha; cf. Smith, Meaning, 93.
Cf. Geoffrey Parrinder, Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World's Religions. Oxford: Oneworld, 1997, chs. 2, 11.
Cf. Moojan Momen, Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith. Oxford: George Ronald, 1990, 5-11.
Cf. Arvind Sharma, "Buddhism met Hinduism: Interaction and Influence in India," in Arvind Sharma, ed., The World's Religions: A Contemporary Reader. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011, 234-40; Roland Faber, ""Must 'religion' always remain as a synonym for 'hatred?'": Whiteheadian Meditations on the Future of Togetherness," in Faber and Slabodsky, Living Traditions, 167-82.
Michael Sours, The Station and Claims of Bahá'u'lláh. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1997, ch. 5.
Cf. Chen, Tao Te Ching, 10.
Cf. Chew, Religions, 24.
Cf. Chan, Source Book, 36-41, 430-431.
The Dao De Jing is situated in the time of warring local states against one another and should be read as a profound criticism of the political barbarism this situation implied. Hence, it lays out a political philosophy of harmony that, if realized, would indicate the ideal of civilization that the myth from the deliberate choice of Laozi for exile emphasizes as being impossible to be established; cf. Wong, Taoism, ch. 2.
Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China. Vol 6/2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 85-93.
Cf. Chen, Tao Te Ching, 10-12; Chew, Religions, 24; Fischer-Schreiber, Dictionary, 88.

It is an “anthology”: cf. Alan Chan, “Laozi,” in Stanford Encyclopedia of
Philosophy (5/2/2013), ch. 4 @
https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/#TexTra; Chan, Source Book, 137-138. This collection also indicates that it was prepared by a group of authors, rather than by one person.

Cf. Star, Tao Te Ching, 7-9.
Cf. Annemarie Schimmel, The Mystery of Numbers. NY: Oxford University Press, 1993, 164-180. Schimmel may indicate a relationship of the (number of) 81 (chapters) of the Dao De Jing to the birth myth of Laozi, who, in one version, was born 9x9 years after his conception (170).
Cf. Peter Smith, A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá’í Faith. Oxford: Oneworld, 2008, 261; Stephen Lambden “The Word Bahá: Quintessence of the Greatest Name,” in Bahá’í Studies Review 3:1 (1993): 19-42.
Cf. Fischer-Schreiber, Dictionary, 175.
Cf. Cleary, Tao, 2. This early estimate is of course challenged by the fact that the Dao De Jing was already a reaction to Confucianism, imagining a different kind of society, and, hence, must be later in origin or, as a collection, fitting more into the time of the warring states of the third century B.C.E.; cf. Chen, Tao Te Ching, 5, 21.
Cf. Chan, “Laozi,” ch. 3; Chen, Tao Te Ching, ch. 3
Cf. Alan Chan, “The Daode Jing and Its Tradition,” in Olivia Kohn, ed., Daoism Handbook, Leiden: Brill, 2000, 1-29.
Cf. Clarke, Tao, 61.
Cf. Chan, Source Book, 137.
Cf. Robinet, Taoism, 29. On the diverse traditional commentaries, cf. Chan, “Laozi,” ch. 4.
Cf. Chad Hansen, “Daoism,” in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2014 Edition), ch. 2 @
http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/daoism/. Dao Jia, although it cannot ever be separated from origins in alchemical and shamanic surroundings and the development of its central figures into religious heroes, like Laozi, of Dao Jiao, can of course not be reduced to Laozi and the Dao De Jing, but, nevertheless, he and his book remain the “foundational” text together with the Zhuangzi and several other ancient works in a tradition that from the beginning has gathered itself among many traditions—the “thousand schools”—and among several streams of reception and interpretation, one of which might have been a Laozi-school. Cf. Blofeld, Taoism, chs. 1-2; Fung, History, chs. 2-3; Robinet, Taoism, ch. 1; Chan, Source Book, chs. 2-16; Chen, Tao Te Ching, 8-9.
Cf. Wong, Taoism, ch. 2.
Cf. Grigg, Tao, 29-57; Clarke, Tao, ch. 2; Chan, Source Book, 136; Chen, Tao Te Ching, 15-18, ch. 2; Fung, History, chs. 18-26.
Cf. Chen, Tao, 15-18; Watts, Tao, 27-31.

Cf. Needham, Science. Vol. 2, 86-100; Chad Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 3.
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Cf. Jacques Gernet, A History of Chinese Civilization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 102; Clarke, Tao, 105.
Cf. Chad Hansen, A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, ch. 6; Clarke, Tao, ch. 5. Yet, as many ideas, they may have been ideals, never to be realized in pure form, as, in fact, under the influence of Daoist political reign feudalism prevailed; cf. Kristofer Schipper, The Daoist Body. Trans. by Karen Duval. Berkeley: University of California, 1993, ch. 1.
Cf. Watts, Tao, 46-50.
Cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 9.1.1. The differentiation between why and how does not exclude the Dao to be understood in metaphysical terms of ultimate reality—as it is mostly perceived to be: cf. Blofeld, Taoism, ch. 1; Chew, Religion, 25-28—but it warns us to attempt understanding ultimate reality beyond our ability to act, or to divide between mysticism and metaphysical insight, on the one hand, and ethics, world-engagement and social action, on the other. This might indicate a resonance of intention between the Dao Dee Jing and Bahá’u’lláh’s explication of mystical-ethical insights in his “prophetic” collection of the Hidden Words. Cf. Todd Lawson, “Globalization and the Hidden Words,” in Margit Warburg, Annika Hvithamar and Morten Warmind, eds., Baha’i and Globalization. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005, ch. 2.
Cf. Dao De Jing, #37; Fung, History, 97-102.
Cf. Blofeld, Taoism, ch. 3.
Cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” chs 4, 9.1.1.
Cf. Needham, Science. Vol. 2, 74-83.
Cf. Hansen, Theory, ch. 3.
Cf. Hansen, Theory, ch. 4.
Cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 2; Clarke, Tao, 175-184.
This relativism is not to be confounded with an “anything goes” approach, as westerners might feel to appropriate its insights, but as a new kind of normativity, namely, that of spontaneity in the flow of things; cf. Clarke, Tao, 98.
Cf. Fung, History, 102-103.
Cf. Hansen, Theory, 225; “Daoism,” ch. 3.
Cf. Livia Kohn, Taoist Mystical Philosophy: The Scripture of Western Ascension. Albany: State of New York University Press, 1991, ch. 1; Hanson, “Daoism,” ch. 3.
Cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 6: Clarke, Tao, 80-91.
Cf. Livia Kohn, Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, chs. 1-

2; Clark, Tao, ch. 7. This implies that we can, in fact, live according to

“nature” if we follow the unknowable Dao, that is, as this mystical Way implies some kind of experiential metaphysical or even religious descriptive probabilities; cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 2. In the exemplarity of the “perfect human being” lies also a certain connection to the notion that the Manifestation is the mirror of the of apophatic Reality such that Reality, which is unknowable per se, becomes accessible in this mirror at least as the way of life implied in this knowledge, but not besides their revelation; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, #30; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, #5;
Questions, #27. We might even find a resonance here to the fact that to reach this point of perfection is a rare possibility so far so that later elevations and divinizations of certain masters, but at least of Laozi, seem to demonstrate that such a possibility is by no means just a bottom up achievement, but might rather be the expression of grace from above, of divine embodiment.
Cf. Clark, Tao, ch. 8. In a more radical interpretation, this relativism equates with a pluralism that is (metaphysically) presupposing skepticism as to the ability to gain any insight into the nature of things; cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 2.
Cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 9.1.1; Clarke, Tao, 101.
Cf. Chan, “Laozi,” ch. 6; Hansen, “Daoism,” 9.1.2; Clarke, Tao, 90-103.
This “virtuosity” is like learning to carve wood along its grain, rather than
against it, learning the natural way; cf. Watts, Tao, xvii.
While the ideal of the Daoist sage is, therefore, the withdrawal from society into nature, this does not mean that Daoism was apolitical; rather it furthered resistance against the feudal society, and the creation of counter-societies of equality, based on agriculture, and generally with a pacifist orientation; cf. Clarke, Tao, 103-111; Robinet, Taoism, 27; Needham, Science. Vol. 2, 86-132.
Cf. Hansen, Theory, 212-213; Hansen, “Daoism,” chs. 3.3, 4, 8, 9.4, 9.5.
Cf. Hans-Georg Moeller. The Philosophy of the Daodejing, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, ch. 5. Situating the Dao De Jing primarily as a political philosophy in the context of the warring state period, Moeller speaks of the establishment of peace by the method of “dehumanization” (76).
Cf. Chan, “Laozi,” ch. 7.
Dao De Jing, #1; transl. by Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 4.
This does, however, not exclude political quarrels for supremacy of respective groups and religious “inclusion” of the other parties; cf. Clarke, Tao, 22-28. While exclusivism is especially haunting Abrahamic traditions, the possibility of one person in relation to different aspects of their life to embrace all three traditions, respectively, shows the

fundamental different approach to religious identity in the Chinese

context.
Cf. Grigg, Tao, passim; Joseph Bracken, The Divine Matrix: Creativity as a Link between East and West. New York: Orbis Books, 1995, 133-135.
Compassion (sanbao) is one of the three root virtues in Daoist living, one of the "Three Treasures," first appearing in the Dao De Jing, #67; cf. Lin Yutang, The Wisdom of Laotse, Random House, 1948, 292; Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives, eds., The Emptying God: A Buddhist- Jewish-Christian Conversation. Edited by, 3-68. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990, 3-67.
Cf. Kohn, Mysticism, ch. 6; Hansen, "Daoism," ch. 8.
Cf., Antonio Cua, "Opposites as complements: reflections on the significance of Tao," in Philosophy East and West, 31:2 (1981): 123–40; Hansen, "Daoism," chs. 4, 9.2.
Cf. Ellen Marie Chen, "Nothingness and the mother principle in early Chinese Taoism," in International Philosophical Quarterly 9 (1969): 391–405.
The identification of ultimate reality with "nothingness" is based on the term wuji, which is itself a term of ultimate reality. It appears for the first time in the Dao De Jing, #28 and also means the limitless infinite in the Zhuangzi, ##1, 6, 11, 15; cf. Zhang Dainian and Edmund Ryden, Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy. Yale: Yale University Press, 2002, 72. For the resonances with the "two truths" and Madhyamika cf. Friederike Assandri, Beyond the Daode Jing: Twofold Mystery in Tang Daoism, Dunedin, FL: Three Pines Press, 2009; Mark Csikszentmihalyi, "Mysticism and Apophatic Discourse in the Laozi," in Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, ch. 1.
Dao De Jing, #1.
For the thesis that Daoism and Buddhism in China were not two contrasting religions, cf. Henri Maspero, Taoism and Chinese Religions. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981, 412. For the deep resonances with Zen, cf. Masao Abe, Zen and Western Thought. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, chs. 2-3.
If we think of Daoism as philosophy (dao jia), being internally touched by the truth of its proposition (correlating it with experience) is to be expected; cf. Bahá'u'lláh's praise of philosophers, especially Socrates, in
his Lawh-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), 146-147. However, if we view Daoism as religion (dao jiao) it could be said that it is the Bahá'í conviction that all religions receive their life from the same apophatic source of Reality/God (al-haqq) and, hence, are not a dead body of the past, but alive in the unity of Manifestations with their eternal (time-relative, but –invariant) effect in the world of becoming and perishing,

that is, are beyond the boundaries of the religious identities with which they are identified universally "present." In this sense, the Bahá'í

view of
unity is not the expression of a simple supersessionism, in which all religions of the past are “overcome,” but one in which they communicate in an “analogy of faiths” in mutual coinherence and coinhabitation; cf. Faber, Garden, ch. 8: section 6. Therefore, it is not a mere intellectual interest that feeds any serious investigation into the diverse relations from a Bahá’í perspective, but the amazing potential to be able to spiritually understand and share (irfan) from the inside in the spiritual and divine power or grace (fayd) in their confluence in the Bahá’í view—“with
the eye of God, ” rather than as an objective dissector. In some meaningful sense, a Bahá’í could claim to be a believer in these religions, sharing in their riches, as s/he does not make any difference between them (in their origin, in their Manifestations); cf. Stephen Lambden, “Dimensions of Abrahamic and Babi-Baha’i Soteriology: Some Notes on the Baha’i theology of the Salvific and Redemptive role of Baha'-Allah,”
2017 @ https://hurqalya.ucmerced.edu/node/3451. This view is, on a much more tentative basis, current standard understanding of methodological access to multiple religions in comparative studies; cf. Keith Ward, Religion and Revelation. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, chs. 1-2; Raymond Panikkar, “What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?” in Gerald Larson and Eliot Deutsch, eds., Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, 116-36.
Cf. Dao De Jing, #8.
D.C. Lau, “The treatment of opposites in Lao-tzu,” in Bulletin of the Society for Oriental and African Studies 21 (1958): 344–60.
Cf. David Hall, “Process and anarchy: a Taoist vision of creativity,” in Philosophy East and West, 28:3 (1978): 271–85. This is, of course, a modern perception, taking into account the radical potentials of the ideas inherent in the ideas even if they have not, at the time of their inception, been realized in such a radical way.
Cf. Chew, Religions, chs. 5-9. For the Bahá’í context, philosophically, all of these characteristics can be traced back to the Báb and his metaphysical and spiritual understanding of this cosmos to be released from the Divine Point (Will, Mind), which is in its own complex way both unity and diversity, non-opposition and differentiation, creativeness and receptiveness; cf. Nader Saiedi, Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010, part 2.
This is, from a Bahá’í perspective, rather a “natural” assumption, as
all
Manifestations and, in extension, all religions in their true core teach the same truths; cf. Dann May, “The Bahá’í Principle of Religious Unity,”
in
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Jack McLean, ed., Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá'í Theology. Studies in the Bábi and Bahá'í Religions. LA: Kalimat Press, 1997, 1-36. "Confluence" is also always the recognition of the mutual coinherence and coinhabitation, the translucency of religions in the new event of gathering—for Bahá'ís, the new revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. This is
the heart of the Bahá'í conviction of the relativity of religious truth; cf.
Faber, Garden, chs. 1, 9; Juan Cole, "'I am all the Prophets': The Poetics
of Pluralism in Bahá'í Texts." In Poetics Today 14:3 (Fall 1993): 447-76.
The most comprehensive comparison between Chinese Religions and the Bahá'í Faith, that is, mostly of Daoism and Confucianism, which for many Baha'is may feel more familiar, is still Chew, Religions. And the most excellent comparison of Bahá'í sensitivities with the Dao De Jing can be found in Chew, "The Great Tao," 11-39. For the Islamic philosophical background of the Bahá'í Faith in relation to Daoism, cf. Toshihiko Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
Cf. Chew, "The Great Tao," 17-19; Stockman, Bahá'í Faith, 31-35. As to the apophatic nature of the Godhead and its implications as well as the breathtaking interference with "its" manifestation as and in the world, cf. Stephen Lambden, "The Background and Centrality of Apophatic Theology in Bábi and Bahá'í Scripture," in Jack McLean, ed., Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá'í Theology. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 37-78; Moojan Momen, "The God of Bahá'u'lláh," in Moojan Momen, ed., The Bahá'í Faith and the World's Religions: Papers presented at the Irfan Colloquia. Oxford: George Ronald, 2003, 1-38.
Cf. Isuzu, Sufism, part 1/II and part 2/VII. It would be limiting if we were tempted to reserve this intended "apophatic" Oneness to the unknowable Godhead (as "formless") by exclusion of the manifest "God" (Primal Will) as "formed" or "determined." Rather, the unity of unnamable and manifest Dao is a hint to the "divine sphere" of both these highest realms of divinity, crossing the highest realms of divine "existence," symbolically sometimes addressed in Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings as hahut and lahut; cf. Momen, "God of Bahá'u'lláh," 25. And the Primal Will in the writings of the Báb is not
"form" either, but infinite potential to be determined by form, united in the Primal Point; cf. Saiedi, Gate, 183, 202 (and the whole of chs. 7-8).
This "emptiness" is directed against all projections on "it" of categories,
which remain always only our abstractions, not "its" reality. This, among other things, is also addressed in the Islamic and Bahá'í universe of discourse by the expression that God alone "exists." For the implications,

explicated in Bahá'u'lláh's tablet of Uncompounded Reality, cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Law –i Basít al-Haqíqa). Introduction and translation by Moojan Momen: "Bahá'u'lláh's

Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Law –i Basít al-Haqíqa) in: Lights of Irfan 11 (2010): 203-21; Faber, "Bahá'u'lláh," 53-106.

Bahá'í writings follow the maxim that absolute unity excludes all attributes; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Valleys, 24 (Seven Valleys: Valley of Knowledge). This "exclusion" also applies to any emphasis on unity over and against multiplicity. We must learn to "perceive, with an eye purged from all conflicting elements, the worlds of unity and diversity, of variation and oneness, of limitation and detachment"; Bahá'u'lláh, Iqan,

160. For the philosophical and theological importance of this insight against such a simplified emphasis and its unfortunate implications, cf. Faber, Divine Manifold, part 1.

Cf. Chew, "The Great Dao," 19-21. For the differentiation between exclusive and inclusive unity (ahadiyyah and wahadiyyah, respectively) and their mutual interference on all levels of existence in the Bahá'í context, cf. Rhett Diessner, Psyche, ch. 1.

Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Questions, #37.

Cf. Chew, "Great Dao," 21-22. For the motive of creation out of love and beauty, cf. Abdu'l Bahá, Commentary on the Islamic Tradition "I Was a Hidden Treasure." Translation by by Moojan Momen, in Bahá'í Studies Bulletin, 3:4 (1995): 4-35.

Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Days, #9; Gleanings, #131.

Spontaneity (bada') is the essence of creativity, be it of God or of any creature; cf. Saiedi, Gate, chs.7-8; Idris Samawi Hamid, The Metaphysics and Cosmology of Process According to Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i: Critical Edition, Translation and Analysis of Observations in Wisdom. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1998.

Cf. Baha'u'llah, Gleanings, #14; Tablet of the Son (Jesus) §9 in Juan R. I. Cole, "Baha'u'llah's 'Tablet of the Son [Jesus]': Translation and Commentary. Translations of Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Texts, 5(2), May 2001 @ http://www.h-net.org/ bahai/trans/vol5/son/bhson.htm; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2012, #93.

Again, the continuity of such religious insights is more than a distancing statement about some "other" religion, but rather the translucency of their internal communication in the unity of all religions and their Manifestations; cf. Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day Is Come. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing, 1996, 108.

Cf. Phyllis Chew, "Religious Pluralism in Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith," in World Order 34:1 (2002): 27-44; Moojan Momen, "Relativism:

A Theological and Cognitive Basis For Bahá'í Ideas," in Lights of Irfan 12
(2010): 367-97.
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Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 13.
Cf. Momen, "God," 14.
Cf. Momen, "God," 15-17; Moojan Momen, "Relativism: A Basis For Bahá'í Metaphysics," in Moojan Momen, ed., Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988, 185-218.
Cf. May, "Principle," 25-27.
Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, #40; Christopher Buck, "Fifty Bahá'í Principles of Unity: A Paradigm of Social Salvation," in Bahá'í Studies Review 18 (2012): 3-44.
Cf. Chew, "Great Dao," 24-33; Chew, Religions, chs. 8-24. Many resonances cannot be discussed here, but can to a good extent be found in Chew's work, such as strategies for peace, education, priority of agriculture (maybe ecology?), overcoming of prejudices, principles of living as a sage, striving for perfection (as to be realized at any given moment and in any given situation), growth of character and insight, political strategies of non-violence and non-interference (wu wei), organicity of living and acting, multiplicity of communities, interreligious relationships, and so on. For mystical insight (irfan) as one of widening perceptivity, cf. Roland Faber, God as Poet of the World: Exploring Process Theologies. Louisville: WJK, 2008, §48.
Cf. Chew, "Great Dao," 22-24; Julio Savi, "The Sufi Stages of the Soul in Bahá'u'lláh's The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys," in Moojan Momen,
ed., The Bahá'í Faith and the World's Religions: Papers presented at the Irfan Colloquia. Oxford: George Ronald, 2003, 89-106.
Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet to Jamal-i-Burujirdi
(Lawh-i-Jamál-i-Burujirdí).
Translation by Khazeh Fananapazir, in Bahá'í Studies Bulletin, 5:1-2 (1991) 4-8 @ http://bahai- library.com/bahaullah_lawh_jamal_burujirdi.
Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, #41; Promulgation, ##71, 105.
Cf. Zhihe Wang, Process and Pluralism: Chinese Thought on the Harmony of Diversity. Frankfurt, GER: ontosverlag, 2013.
Cf. Chew, Religions, chs. 5, 7; Faber, "Religion," 167-182; Roland Faber, "Process, Progress, Excess: Whitehead and the Peace of Society," in Lukasz Lamza and Jakub Dziadkowiec, eds, Recent Advances in the Creation of a Process-Based Worldview: Human Life in Process. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, 6-20; Roland Faber, "Becoming Intermezzo: Eco-Theopoetics After the Anthropic Principle," in Roland Faber and Jeremy Fackenthal, eds., Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness. New York: Fordham Press, 2013, 212-238.
Cf. SWAB #225. This image is the basis for the reflections on the

relativity of religious truth for a future civilization of peace in my Garden, ch. 2.

While this might sound somehow too anarchic for a Bahá'í understanding for which the novelty of the current Manifestation is also related to a new matrix of commandments, one should also not forget that the Kitab-i Aqdas is not constructed and presented as a casuistic law book, but as a "choice wine"; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book.

Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1993, ?4-5. This character challenges humanity to implement its meanings and ordinances in highly creative ways by sensing the necessities and predicaments of, and choices we have in, an interrelated, ecological world—never without the originative impulse of the individual insight and understanding in any given situation, but always oriented toward the greater insight and understanding; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i Aqdas.

Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1994, 200: "Blessed are those who meditate upon it [Aqdas]. Blessed are those who ponder its meaning."

While Confucianism might feel as the more "natural" choice in this context, as it relates clear social structures, the overturning of traditional orders is a pressing motive of the novelty of this, and every, new Manifestation; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, #143. This is an area where more research and imagination will be fruitful. Cf. Roland Faber, God as Poet, ??44, 46; Roland Faber, The Becoming of God: Process Theology, Philosophy and Multireligious Engagement. Portland, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017, Sphere V.

Cf. Faber, God as Poet, §§41-42; Divine Manifold, Intermezzo 1; Garden, Epilogue (sec. 4).

Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets, ##8, 11; ADJ 35-36.

Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, #225.

CF. John Kolstoe, Consultation: A Universal Lamp of Guidance. Oxford: George Ronald, 1988.

This would seem to be part of the serious application of Bahá'u'lláh's imperative of the equality of, and non-difference between, Manifestations; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, #24.

Cf. Momen, "Bahá'í Approach," 167-188; "Learning from History," in Journal of Bahá'í Studies 2:2 (1989) @ https://bahai-library.com/momen_learning_from_history.

Such complex relationships (between theism and monism) are by no means external to the philosophical and religious becoming of the Bábi-Bahá'í religions, as they are fluent in a vast Sufi universe of discourse and their relationship to eastern traditions of thought and wisdoms, especially regarding non-dual thinking; cf. Izutsu, Sufism, chs. 2, 4-5; Momen, "God," 1-8; Faber, "Bahá'u'lláh," 53-106.

Cf. Kohn, God, part 2.
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This “nature” is not controlled by reason or the Logos in an Abrahamic sense, which again has God as the ultimate point of reference, but also not in the Stoic sense, which does avoid reference to a transcendent Godhead; cf. Watts, Tao, 41-42; Longxi Zhang, The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West. Duke University Press, 1992, 22-34.
Here, questions of the status of any law of prophets, their “books,” come into sharp relieve with the change of any such law from dispensation to dispensation and even within any dispensation according to the changing exigencies of the time. In light of the Daoist antinomian ultimate (the apophatic), we may also recognize more starkly the contrast between two imperatives: to follow the temporal recognition of a Manifestation and its commandments, but also to always follow the indefinite presupposition of non-imitation and independent insight into Truth/Dao.
Cf. Chung-yuan Chang and Zhao Xian Batt, Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art and Poetry. London: Julian Press, 1965.
This is the reason that process thought can be a means of mediation, not only as it is acknowledged to present this Chinese “processual” universe in western language—and as it is also used by Chinese scholars to translate their thought—but even more so as the very basis of the Bábi-Bahá’í universe of discourse lies in the process philosophy of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i that directly connects the process thought of the philosophical Bahá’í background to Chinese categories of feeling and thought; cf. Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology. ed. by D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 1978, 7, 21; Hamid, Metaphysics, ch. 4; Faber, Garden, ch. 3.
Hence, mutual translation is possible, as especially the work (and the reception of the work) of Alfred N. Whitehead has demonstrated; cf. Needham, Science. Vol. 2, passim; David Hall and Roger Ames, Thinking Through Confucianism. Albany, State University of New York, 1987; Faber, Divine Manifold, chs. 7-8, 15; God as Poet, §§19, 39; Alfred North Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas. New York: Free Press, 1967, ch. 20.
Cf. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation, #79.
This linear simplicity is also broken by the metaphoric of the Bahá’í writings of cyclic becoming (of renewal and phases of revelations and dispensations), which is not necessarily such that all that the last cycle has produced—such as trees—are, in the new season, dead and exchanged; this is also corroborated by the fact that a garden of many flowers is beautiful not because all of them have become the same flower in a certain time or area (or dispensation), but because multiplicity itself contributes to the beauty, and only as long as it is appreciated and respected; cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Questions, #4; Tablets of the Divine Plan. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1991, #14.

Cf. Chew, Religions, 44, 47. Lee Sun Chen, Laozi's Daodejing. Bloomington: iUniverse, 2011, xvii-xviii; Albert Cheung, "The Common Teachings from Chinese Culture and the Bahá'í Faith: From Material Civilization to Spiritual Civilization," in Lights of Irfan 1 (2000): 38.

While emphasis is given to Laozi, here, a full understanding would have to explicate the role of other sages, such as Zhuangzi and, especially, Confucius. This is also highlights by the fact that when 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions Confucius as an "ethical reformer," he seems not to suggest that he was "only" such a reformer, but rather a reformer of profound impact on the development of human civilization (which would meet the historical facts), as he is still mentioned among a series in which all other personages are considered Manifestations; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation, #109.

Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, 155. In other words, it is not enough only to take recourse to the fact that any revelation comes to a closure (in some profound sense, even if there may remain mechanisms of renewal) and, hence, over the time of its further unfolding in the respective religious community with its own history will have to live from its references backwards, which inevitably and eventually implies that it will become out of sync with the new times it might even have helped to instigate; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, #41; Questions, #43. We must, instead, try to seek a framework that allows these "blind spots" of every contingent limitation of revelation in time and space as created by its recipients—that is, this fact does not necessarily include the view of the imperfection of the revelation in itself; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, #22—to be constructively addressed. One of these frameworks is religious pluralism, as already mentioned in other sections; another one appears in the foundational principle of the relativity of religious truth, which must be made to bear on this matter here, as a form of relationality or mutuality, which, theoretically, allows for the discovery of the other not as alien, but already as moment of one's self and vice versa and, practically, emphasizes the ability to listen and learn; cf. Faber, Becoming of God, Sphere V.

This is part of a wider task, namely, to fulfill 'Abdu'l-Bahá's request to study all religions—Promulgation, #121; Paris Talks, #41—in fairness and in seeking the garden of truth in them as a means to establish the rationality of the oneness of religions and by valuing their contributions to it; an endeavor that has only begun to take hold becoming part of a sustained effort in Bahá'í consciousness, but has become a general presupposition of interreligious dialogue today. Compare only to the works of one of the foremost thinkers of such an intellectual dialogue over the last decades: Paul Knitter, One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995;

Introducing Theologies of Religions. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007; Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009; and as editor of: The Myth of Religious Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá admonishes Bahá’í to grow into this new consciousness that means nothing less than to love all religions; cf. Selections, #34.

Cf. the concept of polyphilic (religious) pluralism: Faber, God as Poet, Postscript; Divine Manifold, Intermezzo 2; Becoming of God, Explorations 14-15; Roland Faber and Catherine Keller, “Polyphilic Pluralism: Becoming Religious Multiplicities,” in Chris Boesel and Wesley Ariarajah, eds., In Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014, 58-81.

This is also implied by Shoghi Effendi’s statements on the receptivity of the Bahá’í universe of other religions, such as this: “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,” in Shoghi Effendi, Promised Day, 108.

Cf. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, #40: “In short, it behooves us all to be lovers of truth. Let us seek her in every season and in every country, being careful never to attach ourselves to personalities. Let us see the light wherever it shines, and may we be enabled to recognize the light of truth no matter where it may arise.”

Cf.’Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation, #126; Selections, #225; Shoghi Effendi, World Order, sections “Unity in Diversity.”

Many more aspects of the whole phenomenon of the religion of Daoism, of which Laozi and the Dao De Jing are inextricable part, cannot be brought into conversation here: the practical life of a cultivation of “becoming human,” the mystical, sexual and alchemical practices, the urge to realize (physical) immortality, the vast complexity of Daoist scriptures and history must, of course, also be part of a thorough discussion; cf. Kohn, Taoism, chs. 2-8; Wong, Taoism, parts 2-3.

Cf. Bowers, God, ch. 13.

Cf. Chew, Religions, 49. Of course, we can always refer to the universal revelation in all of nature as foundational basis for such an occurrence being more than a coincidence; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, #125. But this would miss the point because of the cyclicity of Manifestations revealing themselves in human history as an inevitable additional (although in its depth not different) movement for the advance and education of

humanity; cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections, #34; Questions, #39;

Promulgation, #106.
Cf. Michael Sours, Without Syllable and Sound: The Worlds Sacred Scriptures in the Bahá'í Faith. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2000, chs. 1, 9.
Cf. Lambden, "Background," 1; John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, chs. 14-16.
Hornby, Lights, #1694. From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, November 10, 1939.
Cf. Mirza Tahir Ahmad, Revelation, Rationality and Truth. Tilford: Islam International Publishing, 1998, 165-170; Linda Davidson and Gitlitz, Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland. An Encyclopedia. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2002, 83.
Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets, 22 (Second Bisharat); Fazel, "Dialogue," 137-152.
For preliminary considerations of what, in general, such a framework could include, cf. Seena Fazel, "Dialogue," 137-152.
'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Star of the West 21 (1930): 261.
Cf. Peter Smith, An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 129-131.
Cf. Momen, "God," 23-28.
Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Questions, #24; Sours, Syllable, 17-18.
Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Questions, #25.
Tentatively, such a view is implied in certain guidance of Shoghi Effendi when relating to Joseph Smith and Emanuel Swedenborg as religious teachers sensitive to the revelations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh; cf. Hornby, Lights, ##1719-1722, 1728.
However, as with Swedenborg and Smith, the force field of revelation could be understood as stretching beyond chronological time and embracing not only the future, but also the past as mode of its arising.
Cf. Wong, Taoism, chs. 1-2.
Cf. Smart, Religions, 124; Arthur Write, Buddhism in Chinese History. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959, ch. 1.
Cf. Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2006, 155.
Cf. Smart, Religions, 124-128, 13-151; Grigg, Tao, part 1.
Cf. Christian von Dehsen, ed., Philosophers and Religious Leaders: An Encyclopedia of People Who Changed the World. New York: Onyx Press, 1999, 113.
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Cf. Rudolf Ritsema and Stephen Karcher, I Ching: The Classical Chinese Oracle of Change. Shaftesbury: Element, 1994, 12-13.
Cf. Chew, Religions, 49-50.
Cf. Hornby, Light, #1696.
Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, #87.

Cf. Kohn, God, ch. 1.
Cf. Kohn, God, 291-293; Bede Bidlack, In Good Company: The Body and Divinization in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ and Daoist XiaoYingsou. Leiden: Brill, 2015, 58-60.
Cf. Kohn, God, 78; Bahá'u'lláh, GL, #13. The "book" is the Qur'anic sign
of a High Prophet and is, as such, a divine sign upheld be the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh; cf. Sours, Syllable, ch. 2.
Cf. Starr, Dao De Jing, #1.
Cf. Kohn, God, 121-129; GWB #28; SAQ #30.
One cannot simply counter that Christ was conceived as divine from the outset. Current exegetical knowledge has confirmed that a divine self-designation of Jesus, that is, a divine self-consciousness, is not a priori impossible, but that the becoming-divine of Jesus in the full sense of the Councils of the fourth and fifth century C.E. has taken that time to be fully established and settled. That the process regarding Lord Lao took "longer," namely, about a five hundred year span to develop a full understanding of his divinity, hence, cannot simply be viewed as deep a counter-argument; cf. Bart Ehrman, How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee. New York: HarperOne, 2014. Nevertheless, the consciousness to be the "Son of Man," the most reliable self-identification of Jesus in an exegetical context, speaks for the extraordinary consciousness of Jesus, yet widely misunderstood even by his closest followers, only becoming alive by their experience of his exultation; cf. Hurtado, God, ch. 5; Chrys Caragounis, The Son of Man: Vision and Interpretation, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986, ch. 4; Andrew Loke, in The Origins of Divine Christology. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.
Much later deification speaks against this assumption; cf. Kohn, God, passim.
Cf. Tan Chung, Himalaya Calling: The Origins of China and India. Hackensack, NJ: Word Century Publishing, 2015, 71-74.
Cf. Livia Kohn, Laughing at the Dao: Debates among Buddhists and Daoists in Medieval China, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009.
In fact, this argument of "immunization" may rather contribute to the impossibility to accept a new event, such as the Manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh, in light of the "old" master; cf. Faber, Garden, ch. 9.

Cf. Kohn, God, chs. 1, 5-6.
Cf. Horny, Lights, ##1683, 1692-1693, 1696, et alia.
In the Persian Bayan, for instance, the Báb writes of "a thousand thousand Manifestations"; cf. The Báb, Persian Bayan, III:15, in Moojan Momen, ed., Selections of the Writings of E. G. Browne on the Bábi and Bahá'í Religions. Oxford: George Ronald, 1987, 348. Cf. also thesis 6.
Cf. Louis Komjathy, The Taoist Tradition: An Introduction. London:

Bloomsbury, 2013, ch. 2.
Cf. Chan, “Laozi,” ch. 2.
Cf. Craig Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” in David Firth and Lindsay Wilson, eds., Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic Publishing, 2017, ch. 1; Edward Curtis, Interpreting the Wisdom Books: An Exegetical Handbook. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2017, ch. 1. The collective character of the Wisdom literature is also significant in our context as it represents scriptural texts, sometimes accumulated around personages like Job, but also exhibiting anonymous, but prominently assigned authorship, such as David and Solomon, while still being considered part of scripture, or, on other cases, such as the Book of Wisdom, closely connected to it, while not necessarily being about or transporting revelation by a prophet.
Cf. Chen, Tao De Ching, ch. 1.
Cf. Hornby, Lights, #1694; Buck, “Identity,” 172-186; Seena Fazel, “Bahá’í Approaches to Christianity and Islam: Further Thoughts on Developing an Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in Bahá’í Studies Review 14 (2008): 46-47.
The “perfect Shi‘a,” modeled on the “Perfect Man” of Sufism, is present
in the background of the Bábi-Bahá’í religions through the Shaykhi school for which this belief formed the so-called “Fourth Support”; cf. Moojan Momen, An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, 228.
Cf. Guang Xing, The Concept of the Buddha: Its evolution from early Buddhism to the trikaya theory. New York: Routledge, 2010, ch. 1.
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, The Kitab-i Iqan: The Book of Certitude. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1974, 107. Additionally, even if the Báb would have known that Bahá’u’lláh is the awaited Manifestation (man yazhiruhu’lla)—
and there are indications of such a knowledge in the Bábi-Bahá’í writings as well as some speculations around a physical or spiritual meeting of both Manifestations—he did not, besides subtle references to words and phrases related to augmentations of the word bahá, divulge this knowledge. In a deeper sense, this fact is related to this freedom of a Manifestation to choose its becoming revealed to the world.

In a certain sense, any Manifestation is a “hidden” Manifestation, as no Manifestation just openly appears in divine attire, but always in a “cloud”; cf. Michael Sours, The Prophesies of Jesus. Oxford: Oneworld, 1993, 114-131. Bahá’u’lláh mentions that the reason for this “hiddenness”
is the freedom of humanity to develop the sense to apprehend and believe in the Manifestation out of spiritual effort and freedom, instead of coercion; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, #29.

Cf. Romans 1:1-4. As in Christian texts, adoption-, exaltation-, divine mission- (and incarnation-) views appear together from early biblical texts on, but were harmonized in the later centuries by the two-nature-in-one-person doctrine, so is the Bahá'í understanding of the eternity and temporality of a Manifestation harmonized in the teaching of the two stations and natures or twofold station and nature such that the appearance of a Manifestation on the cosmic plane exhibits always essentially both aspects, that is, is never only human, but was always already divine, pre-eternal, pre-existent, as it were, as s/he is the Self of God in the Primal Will of which s/he is an appearance, meta-historically and historically; Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, #29; Sours, Station, ch. 4. For refection of the Ebionite adoption view within a Bahá'í context, cf. Christopher Buck, "Illuminator vs. Redeemer: Was Ebionite Adam/Christ Prophetology "Original," Anti-Pauline, or "Gnostic"? @ https://bahai-library.com/pdf/b/buck_illuminator_redeemer.pdf.

The so-called "messianic secret" in the New Testament is, in fact, a major player in the gradual revelation of the nature and status of the person and identity of Jesus, documented throughout the gospels; cf. William Wrede, The Messianic Secret. trans. by J. C. G. Creig. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1971. And there are similarities with the gradual unveiling of the mission of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh; cf. Christopher Buck, Symbol and Secret: Qur'an Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i Íqán. Los Angeles:

Kalimat Press, 2004, ch. 5. But this would be besides the point in our context since the "hiddenness" indicated, here, would relate to the lifetime of a Manifestation before the declaration, for instance, the "lost years" of Jesus before his baptism.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, #27.

Cf. Saiedi, Gate, 164; Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle, 111.

Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, #22.

Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, #49. One might think of the transfiguration-scene in the Gospels (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36) and the universal appearance of Krishna in the Bhagavat Gita (ch. 11) compared to which the humanity of the Manifestation normally and effectively shields the divine impression in most encounters—resonant with Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation of the apocalyptic biblical and primordial Qur'anic image

of the "cloud" as veil hindering the recognition of a Manifestation; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Iqan, part 1. In fact, most of the efforts of Manifestations seem to consist in providing ways to lead their surroundings the perception of their divine inspiration or even origin.

This might be related to the biblical kenosis-scheme, found prominently in the Deutero-Isaiah figure of the Suffering Servant, cf. Isaiah 53, and its adoption in the Pauline Hymn of Philippians 2:9-11. It should also be noted that Christian theology has, at times, taken this kenotic appearance

of God in this world in the human figure of Christ as an “incognito” movement, as witnessed in Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner; cf. Bernard Ramm, An Evangelical Christology: Ecumenic and Historic. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1985, 58-59.
Cf. Ehrman, Jesus, chs. 6-7.
Cf. May, “Bahá’í Principle,” xx.
Cf. Smith, Encyclopedia, 291. Although these religions, or selections thereof, are sometimes mentioned as affirmed by the Bahá’í writings—cf. Kenneth Bowers, God Speaks Again: An Introduction to the Bahá’í Faith. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2004, 96—and also to indicate the “progressiveness” of religions, the writings themselves don’t claim any exclusivity to them as an exhaustive list.
Cf. Hornby, Lights, #1373.
Cf. Hornby, Lights, ##1373-1375; Ezekiel 1:26; Lambden, “Word Bahá,” 19-42.
In identifying religions, it is not the “religions” that the Bahá’í writings
emphasize, but the Manifestations that engendered religious movements, who are also not necessarily identical with, or limited to, the later established and settled forms of self-identifications of these religions with their founders; cf. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Questions, #43. Conversely, because of the complex non-identity of religions with Manifestations (as their founders) a whole interreligious space of conversations about both religions and Manifestations become available.
In fact, even this list of named Manifestations in the Bahá’í writings is incomplete Cf. Stockman, Bahá’í Faith, 25-38.
Cf. Hornby, Lights, #1373.
Cf. The Báb, SWB 105; GWB #87; SAQ #50.
Cf. Hornby, Lights, #1373.
When Shoghi Effendi states that these are the great religions “of which we have any definite historical knowledge,” and as we can assume that this is not meant to limit historical research into what can be known at any point in the future (from this statement), as Shoghi Effendi explicitly denies, we could maybe understand this “knowledge” in relation to

(limited to the appearance in) the Bahá’í writings, as Shoghi Effendi encourages historical research, but (in our context) demonstrates restraint regarding religious statements that would not have a foundation in the writings themselves; cf. Hornby, Lights, #1374. This seems also to be indicated with Shoghi Effendi’s references to Sabeanism and Hinduism, that is, that we cannot know from the writings more about them as we actually find in them; cf. ibid, ##1692-1694. This same hermeneutical approach can also be assumed from the statement of Shoghi Effendi, that “the only reason there is not more mention of the Asiatic Prophets is because Their names seem to be lost in the mists of ancient history.

Buddha is mentioned, and Zoroaster, in our Scriptures -- both non- Jewish Prophets or non-Semitic Prophets"; cf. Compilation of Compilations. Vol. 1. Compiled by Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Mona Vale: Baha'i Publications Australia, 1991, 21 (#22).

For a differentiated reflection on "progressive revelation" without such symbolic inaugurations, cf. Stockman, Bahá'í Faith, 35-37, 42-43. The statement of Bahá'u'lláh that all religions are of divine origin, with some

exceptions, which he thinks to be of human invention, seems also to imply that not only the mentioned (named) religions are intended, as do similar statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá regarding the love of, and finding truth in, all religions; cf. GWB #111; PT #41; SWAB #43.

Cf. Winfred C. Smith, What is Scripture? Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005.

Hornby, Lights, #1375.

In his high imamology, the Báb considered the Imams—and by extensions the Apostles of Christ—as part of a divine pleroma, which always appears with the Point, the Prophet or the Manifestation, and emanates from this one Soul; cf. The Báb, Persian Bayan, Exordium and Wahid I, in: Momen, Selections, 322-325; http://www.h-

net.org/ bahai/trans/bayan/bayan.htm.

While Krishna is named a Manifestation in the "canonical" Bahá'í catalogue, this figure cannot be considered the "founder" of Hinduism. Also, like Laozi, Krishna is probably a composite figure (thesis 7).

Cf. Qur'an 12; cf. Todd Lawson, "Typological Figuration and the Meaning of 'Spiritual': The Qur?anic Story of Joseph," in Journal of the American Oriental Society 132:2 (2012): 221-244; Lawson, "The Bahá'í Tradition: The Return of Josef and the Peaceable Imagination," in John Renard, ed., Fighting Words: Religion, Violence, and the Interpretation of Sacred Texts. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 135-57.

Cf. Qur'an 19:12-15; Bahá'u'lláh, Iqan, 64-65; Epistle, 171.

Cf. Juan Cole, "Behold the Man: Baha'u'llah on the Life of Jesus," in Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 65:1 (1997): 62; The Báb,

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Wilmette: IL, Bahá'í Pub.,

2014, 49; Bahá'u'lláh, Days, #44; Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, 23.

Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Iqan, 167-168, 212, 254.

Bahá'u'lláh considers the hidden twelfth Imam, the personification of which is understood to be the Báb, as even more than all preceding prophets; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Iqan, 243-244.

Stephen Lambden has pointed to passages—passages in which holy figures, such as the patriarch/prophet Josef, Son of Jacob (Israel), are named Manifestations (mazhar-i ilahi)—in the Bahá'í writings; cf. Lambden, Some Aspects of Isra'iliyyat and the Emergence of the Babi-Baha'i

Interpretation of the Bible. Dissertation: Newcastle University, 2002, 51
Cf. Saiedi, Gate, 168.
Cf. Henry Corbin, Spiritual Body and Celestial Faith: From Mazdean Iran to Shi‘ite Iran. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977, 51-73. Already with the Persian poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi and several Shi‘ite “extremists,” like Ismaelis and Nusayris, Fatimah appears as divine creatrix; cf. Corbin, Alone, 160.
Cf. Dunn, Christology, chs. 5-7.
Cf. Sours, Syllable, ch. 2; Station, ch. 7; Stephen Lambden, “The Sinaitic Mysteries: Notes on Moses/Sinai Motifs in Bábi and Bahá’í Scripture,” in Moojan Momen, ed., Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988, 65-184; “Word Bahá,” 19-42.
Cf. Hurtado, God, ch. 2.
Cf. Ben Witherington, Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994, ch. 8.
Cf. GWB #34; TB #11; SDC 97, #147;
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Law-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), in Tablets, ch. 9; Prayers, ##86, 93;
Cf. Witherington, Jesus, ch. 2; cf. Curtis, Wisdom Literature, ch. 4.
Cf. John 1:1-18; Witherington, Jesus, 368-380.
Cf. Daniel 1:20; 2:13; Jacques Doukhan, Secrets of Daniel: Wisdom and Dreams of a Jewish Prince in Exile. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000, 6-12. The influence of the Book of Daniel on the Bahá’í Writings is not only attested by their application of its apocalyptic mathematics regarding the coming of the Son of Man/Messianic King from Jewish and Christian writings in ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s exegesis of it — cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Questions,
##10, 13 — but by figuring as the basis for Bahá’u’lláh’s exegesis of the
Olivet Discourse of Mathew 24, which underlies the whole first part of the important Kitab-i Iqan; cf. Nader Saiedi, Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh. Bethesda, MD:

University Press of Maryland, 2000, chs. 4-5; Sours, Prophesies, passim. In fact, the Kitab-i Iqan is wedded to the Book of Daniel insofar as, in Shoghi Effendi’s interpretation, the Iqan is nothing less than the revelation in which the apocalyptic seals of the Book of Daniel (Daniel 12:8) was broken; cf. Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, 139.
Cf. Gen 5:22; Charles Gieschen, Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence. Leiden, NL: Brill, 1998, 156-158.
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Lawh-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), in Tablets, 148n1; Keven Brown, “Hermes Trismegistos and Apollonius of Tyana in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh,” in Jack McLean, ed., Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá’í Theology. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 153-188.

Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation, ##112, 121.
‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, #9; Hornby, Lights, #1696.
Cf. Guy Beck, ed., Alternative Krishnas: Regional and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity. Albany: State of New York University Press, 2005, ch. 1.
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, #22; Lambden, Aspects, 42-45.
Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation, #79.
Cf. Lambden, Aspects, 40: for instance, the term “the Adam of Reality.”
While it may have been the case that Docetism, which wanted to rescue the divine from the evil creation and Christ from the defilement of bodily existence, lived on in the Qur’anic mentioning, or at least, post-Qur’anic interpretation, of the cross, seemingly denying the historicity of the death of Jesus on the cross (Qur’an 4:147), Bahá’u’lláh always accepted this historicity and, hence, was opposed to such a dualistic rendering of the divinity of Manifestations in relation to their historical human existence, but without taking away from their universal spiritual nature representing the Primal Will or Mind; cf. Todd Lawson, The Crucifixion and the Qur’an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009; Cole, “Behold the Man,” 60-64.
The question, here, is not about the exact form of such an emanation—differentiating between incarnation or appearance, manifestation or revelation, theophany or epiphany—but that the intention of the emanation of the Primal Reality from the unmanifest Godhead Beyond is to manifest its Self and realize the infinity of divine attributes that links the transcendent and immanent divine in such way that they are one and, hence, that the world of creation with its impermanence and physicality is not an evil or unnecessary or irrelevant side effect of eternity, but the explication of the whole process of revelation and emanation—something

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has fathomed with the cycle or arc of decent and ascent; cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Questions, ##53-54; Saied, Logos, ch. 2.
Cf. Juan Cole, “‘I am all the Prophets’: The Poetics of Pluralism in Bahá’í
Texts,” in Poetics Today 14:3 (1993): 447-76. Hence, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s often
repeated emphasis of the spiritual reality of manifestations and all prophetic figures; cf. SAQ #23. The same could be said in this context of other religious founders and spiritual figures throughout history—one might think of Guru Nanak and Sikhism, Mahavira and Jainism—namely that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit, who/that makes them what they are in their spiritual station; cf. Stockman, Bahá’í Faith, 38.
Cf. Sours, Syllable, chs. 1-2; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation, #87. The symbolic meaning is the true meaning, the spiritual reality, not an “allegorical spiritualization” of reality that is understood to be material in

nature; cf. Corbin, Alone, 105-135.
Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation, #4; Julio Savi, Towards the Summit of Reality: An Introduction to the Study of Baha'u'llah's Seven Valleys and Four Valley. Oxford: George Ronald, 2008, 37-38.
Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation, #79.
The “Sabians” of Harran seem to have used this corpus as scriptural evidence for being “people of the book” under Islamic rule.
“Apocalyptic” as a qualification does not necessarily indicate precognition of a divinely determined future, but also includes literatures that claim to be able to “see” the higher spiritual realms or even travel in
them to reveal its secrets.
Cf. the 1st Book of Enoch; Chrys Caragounis, The Son of Man: Vision and Interpretation. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 83-119.
Cf. Brown, “Hermes Trismegistos,” 153-188.
Cf. Gilles Quispel, Gnostica, Judaica, Catholica: Colleced Esseys of Gilles Quispel. ed. by Johannes van Oort. Leiden, NL: Brill, 2008; 19-21, 33, 155, 593, et alia.
Cf. Kitty Ferguson, Pythagoras: His Lives and the Legacy of a Rational Universe. London: Icon Books, 2010, 186.
Cf. Juan Cole, “Problems of Chronology in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom,” in World Order 13:3 (1979):24-39.
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Lawh-i Hikmat, in Tablets, 146.
Cf. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation, #3; Sours, Station, ch. 6. In order not to misunderstand this in a triumphalist way, which easily can happen and, in fact, has happen with the emphasis on the exclusivity of “lastness” in other dispensations, Shoghi Effendi attributes the greatness of Bahá’u’lláh
not to the inherent difference in station between him and other

Manifestations, but to the time in which a Manifestation happens and its potentials to be harvested; cf. Fazel, “Pluralism,” 42- 43.
As a prophet who brought a book, the Qur’anic John the Baptizer would have to be considered as a major prophet; in the Bahá’í writings however, he appears as a minor prophet preparing the way for a mayor prophet, Jesus; cf. Cole, “Behold the Man,” 52; yet compare with Lambden, Aspects, 55, 58-60.
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Uncompounded Reality, in Momen, 203-21.
Cf. Peter Smith, The Babi and Baha’i Religions: From Messianic Shi`ism to a World Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 24-26.
Cf. The Báb, Persian Bayan, Wahid III:3, in Momen, Selections, 339-340.
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Days, #42 (207), #44 (216-217).
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Days, #6 (27); Gleanings, #14. In most ancient religions,
the inhaling and exhaling process and symbolism appears in one way or

another as that of the Spirit-breath that binds the creation and annihilation process of the cosmos together into one movement of cyclical renewal. It stands behind the eastern (Hindu) and western (Stoic) expressions of the world conflagration, but, reduced to one linear process, is also behind the biblical creation Spirit (ruah), universally appearing in the pre-creation verse of the Book of Genesis (Genesis 1:2) and specifically as breath of life blown from the nostrils of God into the bodies of living beings (Genesis 2:7, 7:22; Job 27:3), and its eschatological resumption into God, specifically by taking back the spirit of life of individual beings (Psalm 104:9; Ecclesiastes 12:7) and universally in the conflagration of the world in the Psalms (Psalm 18:8) and at or after the universal judgment in the Book of Revelation (20:4). In some meditation technics, the movement of breathing reappears as the most basic bodily expression of the harmonization of individual and cosmic existence. Yet, it can also become the expression of the ultimate metaphysical movement of unification and differentiation, addressing the ancient problem of the one and the many; cf. Faber, God as Poet, §40.

Cf. The Báb, Persian Bayan, Wahid II, in Momen, Selections, 325-338.

It is a standard argument of Bahá'u'lláh, appearing in diverse tablets, that, after answering questions regarding other religions and Manifestations, the reference to them remains only relevant if the seeker embraces the new Manifestation by the appearance of which they become irrelevant if they cannot be related to this novelty in which they are also embraced; cf. Juan Cole, "Bahá'u'lláh on Hinduism and Zoroastrianism: The Tablet to Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Concerning the Questions of Manakji Limji Hataria," @ http://bahaistudies.net/hindu_zoro.html.

This was a trend probably set in motion by Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics. Boston: Shambala, 1975.

Cf. Whitehead, Process, 3-18; Faber, Becoming of God, Sphere 2; God as Poet, part 1.

Cf. Bonnie J. Taylor, One Reality: The Harmony of Science and Religion. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2013, ch. 1. This is also a major concern of Bahá'í thought as reflected in many scriptural passages, elevating this resonance to a foundational Bahá'í principle; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), in Tablets, #9; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, #44. The independent investigation of truth, although hitherto not as defined in the Bahá'í universe of discourse as a condition of the cooperation between science and religion, is, in fact, the effort of philosophy; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, PT, #41.

Alfred North Whitehead, Religion in the Making. New York: Fordham University Press, 1996, 141.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation, #72; Questions, #20.

Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation, ##5, 69.

Cf. Taylor, One Reality, ch. 4.

Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Questions, ##36, 55.
Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, #15.
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Hidden Words, Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2002, Persian, #29; Gleanings, ##5, 90, 153; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections, #21; Promulgation, #4.
Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation, #58.
Cf. SAQ #47; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Taylor, One Reality, 88-91; PUP #79.
Cf. David Palmer and Xun Liu, eds., Daoism in the Twentieth Century: Between Eternity and Modernity, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011; and David Palmer and Elijah Siegler, Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Spirituality. Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2017.
Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Questions, ##1, 47, 69.
Cf. Faber, “Becoming Intermezzo,” 212-238; Divine Manifold, ch. 14.
Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, Days, #10; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Questions, #91.
Cf. Faber, Garden, chs. 7-9.

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