Life as Metaphor

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IN contrast to most institutionalized religious thought, the Bahá'í Faith teaches that spiritual reality is logical and that man should examine that reality with the same rational faculties and rigorous standards which he uses in probing the phenomenal world. In support of this approach, the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá provide clear, forthright, and logically based responses to virtually every major philosophical and theological question.

There is one question, however, that rarely gets asked, not because the answer is unavailable in the Bahá'í Writings, but because most people probably do not think to ask it. The question concerns the moral rationale for physical reality--why it exists and how it functions in relation to spiritual goals. Sometimes the matter is dealt with on a superficial level: since God fashioned the physical world and since He has intended that we should evolve spiritually, then phenomenal reality must be a benevolent creation which somehow facilitates our development. Such a response may be initially comforting, but it does not penetrate to the heart of the matter where the question is conceived in the first place: it hardly resolves the myriad philosophical and pragmatic dilemmas which confront us daily in our desire to cope intelligently with a world that often seems to make little sense.

To some, even the Bahá'í writings may appear enigmatic regarding this matter. On the one hand, Bahá'u'lláh admonishes us to be detached from the physical world: Abandon not the everlasting beauty for a beauty that must die, and set not your affections on this mortal world of dust.2 On the other hand, He commands us to pay close attention to our physical actions, to have a vocation, to be whole-heartedly involved in the phenomenal world: The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.3

Since there are no explicit contradictions in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh regarding this subject and since Bahá'u'lláh has provided us with the

necessary laws and institutions to direct the temporal affairs of men, this question may seem superfluous. Quite possibly this is why the question is rarely verbalized. The result of the unasked question remaining unanswered is that many accept a vision of themselves as precariously tottering between two worlds and most approach things physical with confusion or at least with some vague but haunting sense of guilt or anxiety.

Bahá'u'lláh does give us clear permission to partake of the material bounties of the world: Should a man wish to adorn himself with the ornaments of the earth, to wear its apparels, or partake of the benefits it can bestow, no harm can befall him, if he alloweth nothing whatever to intervene between him and God. . . .4

We still find ourselves trying to live simultaneously in two disparate worlds, one of which, we are told, has the power to impede our spiritual progress. We still sense within us two natures,one spiritual and transcendent, the other appetitive and mundane, and more often than not, the fulfillment of one seems to deny fulfillment of the other.

I

Historically there have emerged three general perceptions of man's proper relationship to physical reality. The first of these attitudes is that man is essentially spiritual in nature and that to attain his highest destiny, man must reject the physical world and the appetites, passions and other debasing kinds of involvement in that reality. Such a view implies that since man is essentially spiritual,

1 Adapted by the author from his `The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality', published in Bahá'í Studies, vol. 3, November 1977 (copyright © 1977, Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith, and reprinted by permission). The original article also appeared with the author's revisions in World Order, vol. 11, no. 4, Summer 1977 (copyright © 1977, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States).

2Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954), p. 26.

3 ibid., p.51.

4 Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956), p. 28.

he should avoid any activity which detracts from his spiritual concerns. Clearly the purest expression of such a view would be the various forms of asceticism. Antithetical to this view is the notion that man is essentially an animal who is happiest when he devotes himself to the physical world and the bounties it can offer and discards the vain and frustrating attempts to become something more transcendent. Such a perception may be reflected in a range of philosophical stances, from hedonism to humanism, but however it is expressed,

the essentially existential tenor of this attitude reflects the emphasis on the physical man and the present tense. Between these extremes are the various attempts to live successfully while participating in both worlds. In general, such views attempt either to find a middle path wherein physical action is governed by spiritual guidelines or to discover an integration of the two realities wherein the physical world is perceived as a Platonic analogue to or reflection of spiritual reality.

To one who peruses cursorily the Bahá'í Teachings, it might appear that the Bahá'í point of view could affiliate with any one of the three categories I have described. The emphasis on practical solutions to world problems, such as world government, world economic systems, and universal education, might seem to imply that the Bahá'í Faith is existentially oriented, particularly with regard to the emphasis in the Bahá'í Writings on deeds:

The essence of faith is fewness of words and abundance of deeds; he whose words exceed his deeds, know verily his death is better than his life.1

Other passages from the Writings, taken by themselves, would seem to indicate a complete disregard of the physical world and a suppression of all material concerns:

Blind thine eyes, that thou mayest behold My beauty; stop thine ears, that thou mayest hearken unto the sweet melody of My voice; empty thyself of all learning, that thou mayest partake of My knowledge; and sanctify thyself from riches, that thou mayest obtain a lasting share from the ocean of My eternal wealth.2

Taken as a whole, the Teachings of the Faith might seem to imply a careful balance, a sort of Aristotelian mean between the extremes of attachment to the physical world and asceticism. A closer examination of the Bahá'í Writings, however, reveals a perception of physical and spiritual reality as one integral, harmoniously functioning construct. From this point of view, physical reality is not an arbitrary creation, nor is it something with which we should only be incidentally concerned as we devote ourselves to another realm. What the Bahá'í Writings do provide are specific and logical responses to questions about the spiritual significance of the physical world.

Throughout the Bahá'í Writings, Bahá'u'lláh states that the physical world has the capacity to reflect or manifest spiritual qualities. This capacity is not confined to mankind, however, but is valid as well for all phenomenal objects and relationships among those objects:

Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God. Each, according to its capacity, is, and will ever remain, a token of the Almighty. Inasmuch as He, the sovereign Lord of all, has willed to reveal His sovereignty in the kingdom of names and attributes, each and every created thing hath, through the act of the Divine Will, been made a sign of His glory. So pervasive and general is this relation that nothing whatsoever in the whole universe can be discovered that doth not reflect His splendor.3

furthermore, He asserts that this capacity is the essential reality of the phenomenal world and that without it, phenomenal reality would cease to exist:

Were the Hand of Divine power to divest of this high endowment all created

things, the entire universe would become desolate and void.4
In another passage, Bahá'u'lláh states that man can perceive this relationship, i.e. the

1 Bahá'u'lláh in Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956), p. 141.

2 Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, p. 25.

3Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952), p. 184.

4 ibid., p. 184.

way in which phenomenal objects mirror forth spiritual attributes:
. . . each and every created thing hath, according to a fixed decree, been endowed with the capacity to exercise a particular influence, and been made to possess a distinct virtue.

He is really a believer in the Unity of God who recognizeth in each and every created thing the sign of the revelation of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, and not he who maintaineth that the creature is indistinguishable from the Creator.1
In still other passages, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the capacity of the physical world to reflect the divine attributes and the capacity of man to recognize this correlation are not coincidental; it is the explicit function of the physical world to educate man:
Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of My command I made thee to appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things.2
Metaphorically, the Writings depict physical reality as a classroom replete with teaching devices, the physical objects themselves. The Bahá'í Writings also make clear that the student is not left to his own intuition to utilize this educational environment. He is provided with teachers, the Manifestations, who explain the objectives of that education and the means by which they can be achieved. In short, the Manifestation relates the physical experience to spiritual growth, though like the wise teacher He is, He forces the student to participate in discerning these correlations.

The complexity of the Manifestation's task is partly evident in the fact that He must work on two levels in order to make us understand the nature of where we aspire to be, a spiritual realm, and of where we are, the physical world. Consequently, the Manifestation has two corresponding aspects of His identity. As He reiterates the eternal, changeless attributes of the spiritual world, He is a Revelator, an Unveiler of divine reality and moral law. In this context, religious law transcends the usual connotation of the imposition of order on disorder. Properly understood, moral or spiritual law assumes the same objective authority as scientific law: just as scientific law describes

relationships among phenomenal entities, so spiritual and moral law describe the relationships among spiritual entities. In this sense, mora l law is not an arbitrary prescription; it is objective description. So it is that we ascribe to Newton the virtue of having discovered and formulated the law of mutual attraction of masses, not of having contrived or invented this property of matter. Similarly, the Manifestation does not create divine reality or the laws governing that reality: He reveals them to us and promulgates compliance with them. Likewise, just as advances in scientific understanding render more and more complete our descriptions of the phenomenal world, so the progression of revelation by the Manifestations renders our understanding of the spiritual realty and its laws more and more accurate and complete.

But the Manifestation is not only a describer or revealer. He actively affects the degree to which the physical world reflects the spiritual world. In this capacity, He becomes more than an instructor who helps us to understand and utilize our physical classroom; He becomes a creative force which puts in motion the energies and laws that will cause that spiritual reality to be actuated in the phenomenal world.

For example, when Bahá'u'lláh instituted the concept of the equality of men and women, He was both revealing a spiritual verity which has always existed, and pronouncing to what extent the physical world is ready to manifest that reality. Likewise, when Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the unity of science and religion, He is revealing an objective reality, a universal law, that these two bodies of learning are probing the same organic construct and therefore are not in conflict. At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh is admonishing the human institutions which embody these areas of human investigation to become aware of this verity and to implement it in their own actions so that man may live more successfully.

From the Bahá'í perspective, then, there is no conflict between the physical world and the spiritual world, nor should there be a problem with man's participation in either. That is, in theory if one follows the guidelines which the

1 ibid., p. 189.

2 Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, p. 32.

Manifestation provides, the study of and participation in one world will enhance and facilitate one's perception of and capable utilization of the other. Furthermore, the Bahá'í point of view renders invalid the traditional distinction between the methods used to probe these two facets of our experience. Instead of perceiving religious belief as being beyond and impervious to rational investigation, the Bahá'í Writings state the same standards which are valid for examining scientific belief are equally appropriate to religious conviction:

God has endowed man with intelligence and reason whereby he is required to

determine the verity of questions and propositions. If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science they are mere superstitions and imaginations; for the antithesis of knowledge is ignorance, and the child of ignorance is superstition. Unquestionably there must be agreement between true religion and science. If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.1

II

Bahá'u'lláh's statements about the educational value of phenomenal reality portray the essential unity of the physical and spiritual realms, but in order to understand how spiritual education takes place on the individual level, we must first understand the metaphorical relationship between the two aspects of reality.

First of all, metaphor is one of several kinds of analogical devices, all of which function more or less the same--they compare two essentially dissimilar things. The objects compared made be people, situations, relationships, abstractions, or any sort of material thing, but always there is an implicit or explicit statement of similarity between these essentially different subjects. Secondly, whether the analogical device is metaphor, simile, allegory, conceit, symbol, or some other type of figure, it will contain three basic parts: the tenor, that which is being described; the vehicle, that which is compared to the tenor; and the meaning, that area of similarity between the tenor and vehicle.

The term metaphor is often used to designate this process in general, though strictly speaking, the metaphor is a relatively short, implicit analogical device. Sometimes the term figure or the term image is also used in this general sense, figure denoting figure of speech or rhetorical device, and image designating figurative image. But whatever term one uses, and and regardless of whether the device is a one-word metaphor or an elaborate parable, a a particularly interesting process must occur if the device is to work effectively. The reader or listener must be made to think, to be a bit creative, because he must complete the final and most important part of the process himself. He is responsible for determining in what way the tenor and vehicle are similar.

Take the simple metaphor `Jane is a lovely flower'. The analogical equation is established because the tenor `Jane' is essentially different from the vehicle `flower'. (Had we compared Jane to Mary, the tenor and the vehicle would be essentially the same, both being women, and no analogy would occur.) The reader or listener must now finish the process by by deciding what the tenor and vehicle have in common. If the metaphor is completely obvious or trite, then the mind may go from the tenor to the meaning without the least examination of the vehicle. So everyday similes such as `cold as ice' or `hard as a rock' require no mental examination of the vehicle because no resistance is offered and the process is short circuited. Description has occurred, but the device

has not caused the reader to participate significantly.

The value or function of the analogical process is immense. On the obvious level, it is a useful way to explain the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, the abstract in terms of the concrete. In addition, it has the capacity to compress a great deal of meaning into a few words, and because it offers a variety of meanings, it can be an expansive description rather than a limiting or restrictive one. But probably the most important feature of the analogical process is its ability to educate. That is, when one is forced to examine the vehicle in order to understand the tenor, he is exercising one of his most important capacities as a human being:

1 `Abdu'l-Bahá in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 240.

Metaphor is a process of comparing and identifying one thing with another. Then, as we see what things have in common, we see the general meaning they have. Now the ability to see the relationship between one thing and another is almost a definition of intelligence. Thinking in metaphors . . . is a tool of intelligence. Perhaps it is the most important tool.1

In addition to exercising this faculty of discernment, one is also extracting the meaning for himself instead of having meaning imposed on him. Thus, the analogical process is indirect and objective as the teacher is one step removed from the teaching device. In effect, if one is to obtain meaning, he must exercise his volition and examine the two ingredients. When he gets the meaning on his own, he will not feel that he has been told what to think, though he may be grateful to the one who was creative enough to conceive the equation.

One can hardly discuss the rise of the analogical process with regard to religion without mentioning at least one more important aspect of this device: it is a safeguard against dogmatism. For example, when Christ states that He is the `Bread of Life',2 He means something positive by it; that He is valuable, a source of sustenance, of spiritual nutrition, and a variety of other things. But there is no one `correct' translation of the equation. To view the metaphor as having one meaning is to miss the analogical equation, mistake the vehicle for the tenor, and to end up believing that Christ was actually a piece of bread.

But perhaps the clearest sign of the importance of this process in human development is that without this ability we would not be able to ascend for even a moment from the physical world, because abstract thought is impossible without the use of metaphor. Therefore in order to discuss or understand or perceive spiritual qualities, we must first relate them to a concrete form:

. . . human knowledge is of two kinds. One is the knowledge of things perceptible to the senses . . . The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual--that is to say, it is a reality of intellect, it has no outward form and no place, and is not perceptible to the senses . . . Therefore to explain the reality of the spirit, its condition, its station, one is obliged to give explanations under the forms of sensible things, because in the

external world all that exists is sensible.3

`Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to give examples of this mechanism of human intellect as it enables us to communicate the knowledge of abstract thought:

For example, grief and happiness are intellectual things; when you wish to express those spiritual qualities you say: `My heart is oppressed; my heart is enlarged'; though the heart of man is neither oppressed or enlarged. This is an intellectual or spiritual state, to explain which you are obliged to have recourse to sensible figures. Another example: you say, `such an individual made great progress,' though he is remaining in the same place; or again, `such an one's position was exalted,' although like every one else, he walks upon the earth.This exaltation and this progress are spiritual states and intellectual realities; but to explain them you are obliged to have recourse to sensible figures, because in the exterior world there is nothing that is not sensible. So the symbol of knowledge is light, and of ignorance, darkness; but reflect, is knowledge sensible light, or ignorance sensible darkness? No, they are symbols.4

Hand in hand with the faculty for inductive logic, the analogical sensibility enables the child to pass beyond the Pavlovian or Skinnerian reflex and to conceptualize himself and the world around him. Wittingly and unwittingly, a child collects the data from his daily experience, perceives the similarity among these experiences, and induces an abstract belief about those experiences. For example, the child is punished or corrected for various actions, essentially different actions, and he perceives the similar ingredients of rules, authority, obedience. He then induces the generalizations about those concepts--that there are rules which require his obedience to authority, or, if there is no consistency to the

1 Louis Simpson, An Introduction to Poetry (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), p. 6.

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2 John 6:35; Citations from the Bible in my text are to The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1953).

3 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, trans. and ed. Laura Clifford Barney, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1964), p. 95.

4 ibid., pp. 96-97.

rules of their application, that authority is capricious, unjust, frightening.

From such initial stages of abstract thought, the child can progress without limit to larger, more expansive and encompassing abstractions, since the concept will always be in a relative state of being perceived. For example, once having perceived authority as it is dramatized in the familial relationship, the child may inductively collect and store other dramatizations of this abstraction, perhaps in a teacher, or in a public official. As he continues to expand the data he collects, he may perceive authority elsewhere;

a belief in truth, honesty, or kindness, for example, may represent authority to some people more powerfully than any human figure of authority.

The point is that there is no final or complete perception of the abstraction; it can always be more acutely perceived or more exquisitely dramatized in the phenomenal world. Of course, the idea of limitless growth is not confined to the individual. Society itself can manifest a collective awareness of authority, justice, honesty, and as its awareness of these attributes expands, society is capable of implementing that understanding more completely in social action.

Viewed in this context, the metaphorical process is an educational tool which can help provide unlimited development, even if one has no precise moral code or established theological belief. However, within the context of the Bahá'í perception of man's nature and destiny, this process assumes a much greater significance--not only does this endeavor bring immediate fulfillment and happiness by utilizing the physical metaphor as it was created to be used; it also results in the gradual improvement of the soul itself as, incrementally, particular attributes are habituated and assimilated.

III

The improvement of the soul by dramatizing spiritual attributes is hardly a new notion. The allegorical fable has long been recognized as an effective device for teaching children. Likewise in the medieval era, the Christian church used allegorical theater (morality plays) to teach an unlearned and predominately illiterate populace the essential doctrine of their Faith. In fact, virtually all drama, including classical tragedy, ultimately derives from this same impetus and origin. Common among all these forms was the attempt to give tropological expression to metaphysical concepts--to express spirituality in concrete form.

This is not to imply that all such devices can be distilled into one common process, but all do share essentially the same ingredients or steps. First, one must understand the nature of the attribute by observing how this quality might be made manifest in physical action. Secondly, one must decide to acquire this attribute by carrying out this action. Third, one must fulfill his noble intentions, not once, but consistently, repeatedly until the response is habitual, instinctive. When a particular dramatization of the attribute has been habituated, we can assume that the soul has, to some degree, assimilated that quality. It is then possible for one to perceive that same attribute on a higher level and to implement this understanding with a repetition of the same sequence of responses. In this manner, the human soul can continue to progress, whether in this world or the next, without ever reaching a final stage of perfection because, according to the Bahá'í Writings, the human soul has the capacity for infinite growth:

When man reaches the noblest state in the world of humanity, then he can make further progress in the conditions of perfection, but not in state; for such states are limited, but the divine perfections are endless.

Both before and after putting off this material form, there is progress in perfection, but not in state. So beings are consummated in perfect man. There is no other being higher than a perfect man. But when he has reached this state he can still make progress in perfections but not in state, for there is no state higher than that of a perfect man to which he can transfer himself.1 The physical metaphor, then, functions on this plane as an integral and inextricable part of man's efforts to fulfill his primary goal, spiritual development. It provides the means by which he perceives spiritual qualities in the

1 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 274.

first place, and it is the means by which he may express and acquire that attribute once it is understood. Even as the process of spiritual growth attains higher levels of response, man never completely relinquishes on this plane this reciprocal relationship between the conception of spirituality and the implementation through metaphorical act.

Take the example of cleanliness. A child may first understand this abstraction in terms of seeing the similarity among diverse acts of cleanliness he is required to perform--cleaning his room, washing his body, putting his toys in order. In the beginning, these acts are received as separate commands: each requires understanding, volition, and action, until it becomes habituated. At some point, the child may perceive the analogical relationship that unites these acts, and instead of having to learn so many specific regulations, he will be able to reverse the process--to apply his understanding of the quality of cleanliness to other ostensibly unrelated situations and to habituate more and more specific manifestations of this quality. As each level of understanding is implemented through habit and discipline, the child is liberated and enabled to apply his volitional energies to ever more sophisticated levels of understanding--cleanliness of thought, purity of motive, chastity of conduct.

Even such a brief treatment of how this process works makes apparent several important factors related to spiritual growth through physical action. First, it is almost inevitably true that spiritual growth is gradual, painstaking, difficult. There are, no doubt, moments of great insight, visions of great change, and possibly days and weeks of rapid advancement. But the enduring and effective change of the human soul is attained slowly, meticulously, wittingly. Secondly, it becomes clear that habit and discipline instead of being restrictive or limiting, are, when applied positively to the formation of attributes, agents of liberation and advancement. Without some capacity for self-discipline, one cannot become released from one level of response in order to ascend to the next level. Consequently, the early training of a child in the formation of good habits and the use of discipline is, when properly taught, a key to freedom and not a stifling of the creative spirit. Once accustomed to the rewards of applied habit and discipline, one will be less likely to be

overwhelmed by a third factor in this process, the negative feedback that is incurred when one struggles against the natural inertia and resistance to growth. That is, if we are looking for spiritual growth without discomfort, we will fare about as well as a marathon runner trying to become conditioned without the willingness to endure days of strain and breathlessness.

If we are not accustomed to persisting in spite of anxiety and discomfort, if we have not experienced analogous efforts where we have persisted and have been rewarded by positive results, then the abstract understanding of the value of our efforts may not be enough impetus to ensure success. This verity explains the problem with seeking a religion which feels good, the assumption being that the seeker is where he should be, already perfected, and any belief which feels uncomfortable by by implying he should struggle to change is clearly erroneous.

IV

If the metaphorical process is the best device by which spiritual growth is initiated in the physical world, then it would seem logical that this process would be evident in the methods of the Manifestations, since they are perfect teachers sent to direct our spiritual development. And what we find when we examine the teaching techniques of the Manifestations is that the metaphorical devices constitute the core of Their methodology as reflected in Their actions, language, and laws.

First of all, the actions, even the identity of the Manifestation involve the metaphorical process. Besides being an Emissary, the Manifestation is also an Exemplar, a perfect reflection of the attributes of God. This capacity relates directly to man's twofold purpose in life: The purpose of God in creating man hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His Presence.1 Since the Bahá'í Writings depict God as essentially Unknowable, then the most effective means of knowing God is through the Manifestation who portrays that Essence to us.

1 Bahá'u'lláh,Gleanings, p. 70.

It is clear, however, that attaining the Presence of God does not imply physical proximity,1 but changing the spiritual condition of our souls so that we are ever more completely acquiring the spiritual attributes of God thereby becoming more like Him. As we have already seen, however, acquisition cannot take place without understanding. What a study of the Writings quickly reveals, in other words, that knowing God and attaining His Presence are aspects of one process. As Bahá'u'lláh points out in His initial statement in the Aqdas, one cannot sever the recognition of the Manifestation from obedience to His laws: These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.2

Recognition of the Manifestation, then, is a necessary prerequisite for spiritual advancement; it is not sufficient to follow some pattern of behavior. And recognition of the Manifestation implies more than perceiving the validity of His description of the universe and the pragmatic value of His ordinances;

it involves perceiving the way in which the Manifestation metaphorizes or dramatizes God to us. In this way, the Manifestation is clearly distinct from every other spiritual teacher, no matter how astute their teachings or wise their laws. To know God is to know the Manifestation first, and to know the Manifestation is to understand the way in which He manifests the qualities of God.

In responding to Philip's request to see the Father, Christ states:
`Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me. Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, `"Show us the Father"?'3
Of course, it is important not to confuse the tenor with the vehicle, not to take the metaphor at its literal value, but to extract the meaning by discerning the similarity between the two components, between the vehicle (Christ) and the tenor (God). Clearly the similarity between these essentially different entities is not physical, since the Manifestation is not necessarily physically impressive and since God is not a physical being. The similarity is not in physical power, since none of the Manifestations aspire to earthly ascendancy. Clearly the commonly held qualities are spiritual powers and capacities. To confuse the literal or physical nature of the vehicle, the person or personality of the Manifestation, with the tenor it represents, the nature of God, is to do more than misuse an analogy. To miss the metaphorical nature of the relationship between the Manifestation and God is to utterly misunderstand the nature of the Manifestation, to fail to understand God Himself, and to confuse the whole educative process by which the Manifestation is attempting to instruct us.

It is no doubt because of this confusion that the Manifestations expend such energy in trying to make this analogical relationship quite clear. For example, even though Christ states that no one can understand God except by first understanding Christ, He makes it clear that He is essentially different from God: `I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.'4 Furthermore, throughout His teaching, He explains that He is not the authority behind the Revelation, but a reflection of the Deity Who is:
`He who believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me.'5

`For I have not spoken on my own authority; the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak.'6

`The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.'7
Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh clearly explains the relationship of the Manifestation to God, and repeatedly enunciates this same theme--that He is a tool which God uses to educate men:
This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing. and He bade Me lift up My voice between earth and heaven . . .8

`This is but a leaf which the winds of the will of Thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Praised, have stirred . . .9
1ibid., p. 184.

2 Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in A Synopsis and Codification of The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book of Bahá'u'lláh [comp. The Universal House of Justice] (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1973). p. 11.

3John 14:9.

4 John 15:1.

5John 12:44.

6John 12:49.

7John 14:10.

8 Bahá'u'lláh quoted in Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944), p. 102.

9ibid.

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By My Life! Not of Mine own volition have I revealed Myself, but God, of His own choosing, hash manifested Me.1

One example of the disastrous results of not recognizing the metaphorical process at work in the nature of the Manifestation is evident in the far-reaching effects of the vote taken at the Council of Nicea in 325. The followers of Athanasius had come to believe that the tenor and the vehicle were one--that Christ and God were the same essence. The followers of Arius believed that Christ was essentially inferior to God. Arius lost. The institution of the Church sanctioned the theology of Athanasius, condemned as heresy the views of Arius, and effectively severed itself from Christ's fundamental teaching for all time. As Muhammad pointed out to the Christians, to equate Christ with God was to add Gods to God, in effect, to believe more than one God, as the idolators did in Muhammad's day:

`Infidels now are they who say, "God is the Messiah, Son of Mary;" for the Messiah said, "O children of Israel! worship God, my Lord and your Lord." Whoso shall join other gods with God, God shall forbid him the Garden, and his abode shall be the Fire; and the wicked shall have no helpers.'2

The use of metaphor is also the key to unlocking the meaning of the physical acts of the Manifestations. Since none of the Manifestations aspire to physical authority or dominion, then clearly any expression of physical power has little importance as a literal phenomenon. In healing the sick, Christ was not attempting to rid the nation of disease or demonstrate innovative medical technique. As `Abdu'l-Bahá explains, the miraculous acts of the Manifestations had as their primary and essential value the metaphorical or analogical dramatization of a spiritual action:

The outward miracles have no importance for the people of Reality. If a blind man receive sight, for example, he will finally again become sightless, for he will die, and become deprived of all his senses and powers. Therefore causing the blind man to see is comparatively of little importance, for this faculty of sight will at last disappear. If the body of a dead person be resuscitated, of

what use is it since the body will die again? But it is important to give perception and eternal life, that is the spiritual and divine life . . .

Whenever in the Holy Books they speak of raising the dead, the meaning is that the dead were blessed by eternal life; where it is said that the blind receive sight, the signification is that he obtained the true perception . . .

This is ascertained from the text of the Gospel where Christ said: `These are like those of whom Isaiah said, They have eyes and see not, they have ears and hear not; and I healed them.'

The meaning is not that the Manifestations are unable to perform miracles, for they have all power. But for them the inner sight, spiritual healing, and eternal life are the valuable and important things.3

It is with obvious wisdom, therefore, that Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá exhort the Bahá'ís not to place any emphasis on the miracles associated with Bahá'u'lláh. First of all, as `Abdu'l-Bahá points out, the act is valuable only to those who witness the event, and even those may doubt what they have seen:

I do not wish to mention the miracles of Bahá'u'lláh, for it may be said that these are traditions, liable both to truth and to error . . . Though if I wished to mention the supernatural acts of Bahá'u'lláh, they are numerous; they are acknowledged in the Orient, and even by some strangers to the Cause . . . Yes miracles are proofs for the bystander only, and even he may regard them not as a miracle but as an enchantment.4

In the second place, there is an obvious temptation on the part of the followers of a Manifestation to praise Him for these physical acts and perceive Him as a figure of temporal power instead of spiritual authority. In other words, it is too easy for the followers to become attached to the metaphorical vehicle, the Manifestation Himself or the literal act He performs, instead of perceiving the essential value of these metaphors, the similarity

1 ibid., p. 102.

2 Muhammad, The Koran, trans. J. M. Rodwell (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1953), p. 494. Sura V: `The Table', verse 76.

3 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 116-117.

4 ibid., p. 44.

between these Vehicles and what They metaphorize.

The incident of Christ's feeding the five thousand is a particularly instructive example of this problem. After He performed the miracle of feeding the masses with only five barley loaves and two fishes, the people believed He was a Prophet. When Christ perceived that they wanted to take Him by force and make Him king, He fled to the hills by Himself. His reason for this evasive action He explained to His disciples the next day when they found Him on the other side of the sea of Galilee:

`Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal.'1
When the people missed the essential meaning or inner significance of His act, and wanted to follow Him for the literal value of the physical action, He left them. The patience with which He afterwards tried to explain the analogical value of His actions is evident in the continuation of His explanation:
`Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." '2
If we think that Christ belabors this imagery, we are wrong; even when He repeats and extends this conceit, the Jews are not able to perceive the analogical process He is using: `I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

`The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" '3

Having been raised in a legalistic religious tradition, the Jews had difficulty understanding teachings which were communicated through analogy, even though most of their own ritual was, in its original intention, metaphorical dramatization. In a very real sense, the actions and teaching methods of Christ were aimed at breaking through this literalistic tradition in order to teach His followers to think analogically, to sense the spirit behind the works. As one of His last actions among His disciples, for example, He continued the bread imagery at the Last Supper:
`Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." '4
In this case, a verbal metaphor was not sufficient; Christ has His own disciples act out the analogy.

The life of Bahá'u'lláh also contains many actions with obvious analogical meaning. The conference at Badasht is perhaps one of the most intriguing. The occasion was the need to `implement the revelation of the Bayán by a sudden, a complete and dramatic break with the past--with its order, its eccleasticism, its traditions, and ceremonials.'5 In order to act out this transition, Bahá'u'lláh rented three gardens, one for Himself, one for Quddús, a third for Taáhirih. According to a p[re-arranged plan,6 Quddús and Táhirih publicly quarreled during the conference, Quddús advocating a conservative

view that the followers of the Báb not dissociate themselves from the religion of Islám and Táhirih urging a complete break with Islám:
`It was Bahá'u'lláh Who steadily, unerringly, yet unsuspectedly, steered the course of that memorable episode, and it was Bahá'u'lláh Who brought the meeting to its final and

1John, 6:25.

2John 6:31-35.

3 John 6:51-52.

4 Matthew26:26-28.

5 Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 31.

6 See The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1962), p. 294, n. 1.

dramatic climax. One day in His presence, when illness had confined Him to bed, Táhirih, regarded as the fair and spotless emblem of chastity and the incarnation of the Fátimih, appeared suddenly, adorned yet unveiled, before the assembled companions, seated herself on the right-hand of the affrighted and infuriated Quddús, and, tearing through her fiery words the veils guarding the sanctity of the ordinances of Islám, sounded the clarion-call, and proclaimed the inauguration of a new Dispensation.'1
This dramatic event no doubt had many figurative meanings, not the least of which was a transition from one `garden', Islám, to a completely new `garden', the Bábí Revelation. We may also find symbolism in the fact that Bahá'u'lláh occupied a third `garden', possibly His Revelation:
Proclaim unto the children of assurance that within the realms of holiness, nigh unto the celestial paradise, a new garden hath appeared, round which circle the denizens of the realm on high and the immortal dwellers of the exalted paradise.2
Possibly the most obvious use of metaphor by the Manifestations is in the language They use. Whether it is the allegorical myths of the Old Testament, the parables of Christ, or the exquisite poetic imagery of Bahá'u'lláh's verses, the language of the Manifestations frequently relies on figures drawn from the phenomenal world in order to translate abstract concepts into terms that men can understand. To render a comparative analysis of the types of imagery used by the successive Manifestations would require volumes, but several general observations will help to demonstrate how essential metaphor is in the language of these Teachers.

As Bahá'u'lláh explains in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, the Manifestations do not always use language which is veiled, illusive, analogical; the way They speak depends on the exigencies of the situation:
It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions,

is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion. Such are the unveiled traditions and the evident verses already mentioned. The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed . . . In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended.3

An illustration of Bahá'u'lláh's statement might be the distinction we would make between the language with which the Manifestation reveals His laws and the language with which He inspires and explains spiritual attributes.

Of course, there are no exact rules regarding when a Manifestation will speak metaphorically and when He will not. As we look at the Old Testament, for example, we can only guess how literally the followers of Abraham or Moses perceived the anthropomorphic descriptions of God and the physical evidences of His intervention in the lives of men. But two major uses of metaphorical language seem relatively consistent, at least with Christ and Bahá'u'lláh.

The first recurring use is to convey concepts of spirituality, for which purpose Christ used the parable. Like the other analogical devices, the parable forces the listener to participate, to decide the meaning. But being an extended analogy in the form of a story, the parable has the further advantage of working on various levels with multiple analogical equations, and of holding the listener's interest, since it is also a dramatic story. Thus while Christ was establishing an intimacy with the literal story by using characters and situations familiar to His audience (laborers in vineyards, sowers of seed, etc.), He was also teaching His followers to think abstractly, to escape the literalism of their past beliefs and to understand the spiritual or inner significance of His words. Instead of an elaborate canon of law, He left them with a treasury of memorable stories, though He left laws as well. Each of these stories could operate on a level of applicability

1 Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By,p. 32.

2 Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, p. 27.

3 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude. trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950), p. 255.

appropriate to anyone searching for understanding and enlightenment. Those who could not penetrate the literal story could not understand His teachings; those who had not already penetrated the literalism of their own Messianic prophesies probably did not recognize the authority of Christ in the first place:

`Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even

what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing, they do not hear, nor do they understand." '1

Christ later told His disciples that `the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures but tell you plainly of the Father,'2 and certainly Bahá'u'lláh fulfills this promise in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Without veiled language or indirection Bahá'u'lláh reveals a highly structured exposition on God's divine plan, describes the nature of the Manifestations, and clarifies the logical basis for the teaching methods of the Manifestations.

Bahá'u'lláh does use imagery when it is called for and He uses it with unsurpassable skill and magnificence. In His meditative Writings, in most of the prayers, in mystical treatises such as The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys which rely heavily on metaphor and allegory, in the second half of The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh and in various other poetic and allusive tablets, Bahá'u'lláh has bequeathed to us a storehouse of metaphor and symbol which which mankind will study for some time to come before scratching the surface of possible meanings. In fact, in describing those utterances in which the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended,3 Bahá'u'lláh states:

Thus it is recorded: `Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of 3which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá`im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth.' He also saith: `We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain.'4

But it is not only in the more obstruse tablets that Bahá'u'lláh uses imagery. Even in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, which is a relatively straight-forward essay, or in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, which contains the laws of Bahá'u'lláh, appears image upon image, sometimes only a word or a phrase, but often several lines in length. To give even the most cursory treatment of these images would be difficult in so short a space; to survey them would be impossible. One need only glimpse a few of the numerous images that appear in the opening passages of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas to understand the problem:

Know assuredly that My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures.

Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.

Whenever My laws appear like the sun in the heaven of Mine utterance, they must be faithfully obeyed by all, though My decree be such as to cause the heaven of every religion to be cleft asunder.5

In these excerpts from some of Bahá'u'lláh's prefatory remarks about His laws, we see the laws compared to lamps, keys, choice wine, and the sun, and these are but a meager sampling of the quantity, the quality and complexity of imagery in the language of Bahá'u'lláh's less metaphorical Writing.

But besides using metaphor in the language of Their teachings, the Manifestations utilize metaphor in the language of prophecy. Many Christians

are still trying to discover the figurative meaning of the metaphorical terms with which Christ describes His return, or the keys to the symbols used in Revelations. Likewise, the scholars of Islám have devoted themselves to interpreting the veiled traditions regarding the Promised Qá`im, just as the Jews have looked for the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy.

1 Matthew 13:10-13.

2 John 16:25.

3Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 255.

4 ibid.

5 Bahá'u'lláh, A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pp. 11-12.

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Perhaps because prophecy is such an important link from one Revelation to the next, Bahá'u'lláh devotes a good portion of the Kitáb-i-Íqán to a study of the nature of prophecy. In fact, because it is replete with examples of how recurring metaphors are used and because it discusses the rationale behind the use of prophecy, the Kitáb-i-Íqán could almost be considered a textbook study on the subject. Specifically, Bahá'u'lláh discusses the use of metaphorical language as He explains vehicles such as `suns', `heaven', `clouds', `smoke', and `angels'; but more interestingly, He discusses some of the reasons for this intentional obfuscation.

Clearly the failure to describe the exact time and place and personality of the next Manifestation is not due to a lack of knowledge on the part of God or His Messengers, but if people were to follow a name or physical aspect only, they would not actually understand what it was they sought. Some might turn to the Manifestation because they wished to achieve fame or use His power for their benefit. Those who already possessed authority and power might view a Manifestation as a threat to their esteem. But because the Manifestation is hidden, one must be spiritually aware in order to discover Him. If one understands authority and power in literal terms, if he looks for a physically impressive figure or someone who aspires to temporal power, he will not be able to discover the meaning of the figurative language of prophecy.

In order to be changed by the spiritual power which emanates from the Manifestation, one has to be spiritually receptive, in the same way that a television receiver can take the invisible signals which surround us and translate them into intelligible pictures. If one examines prophetic language, or confronts the Manifestation, and does not have spiritual receptivity, he may perceive some power, but he will not be able to translate its meaning. In this sense, prophetic language is essentially metaphorical so that we will be obliged to educate ourselves spiritually in order to benefit from God's Messengers.

In the laws of the Manifestation one can find another use of metaphor, though generally not in the language of the laws. For the most part, the

Manifestations describe their laws and the actions of men through these laws in clear, straight-forward language, but the actions they require do have metaphorical value, or inner significance. That is, besides the pragmatic benefits which the laws may bestow, they also force us to act out dramatically in the physical world what we are trying to accomplish in the spiritual world.

This correlation may not be so so apparent with the laws which are basically restrictive and prohibitive in nature, but it is there all the same. For example, th Jews may have thought the Mosaic dietary laws to be arbitrary, but they followed them anyway, and in doing so they practiced reverence for the authority of Moses and His beneficent intentions. Now that science has described how various diseases are contracted, we can understand the scientific basis for the Mosaic laws and perceive that these so-called restrictions were actually a source of liberation. In this sense, perceiving the divine logic and learning to follow the prescribed conduct which the Manifestations reveal is training ourselves to have faith in the ultimate liberation which this ostensible restriction imposes. It is then possible to apply this lesson to our compliance with spiritual laws; no longer are these exhortations viewed as incidental. Like their counterparts (the physical laws) they are pragmatic, logical, sources of liberation. The training we experience in complying with laws governing our physical action transfers into the realm of spiritual action, and the end result is that we understand dramatically and metaphorically the beneficence of God's laws:

Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things.1

Understood in the light of this statement by Bahá'u'lláh, the laws of the Manifestation never prevent the full and complete utilization of the physical experience. On the contrary, even those laws which imply restriction ulti-

1 ibid., p. 25.

mately encourage the most fulfilling use of the physical metaphor. Stated another way, the laws of the Manifestation enable one to experience the metaphorical value of the physical world, even when the follower is unaware that he is doing anything other than obeying divine authority.

The laws which provide creative use of physical experience are perhaps even more obviously re-enforcing the metaphorical value of the physical experience than are the laws of admonition and prohibition. In the first place, these laws change constantly from one Manifestation to the next so that they accurately describe the relative progress of man. As I have already attempted to show, this progress itself is essentially metaphorical in nature in that it is a literal societal construct which figuratively portrays a spiritual condition.

When the law creates institutions, organizational structure, and codes of behavior which foster metaphorical advancement, it is an integral part of man's efforts to dramatize or act out spiritual progress. But besides this long-range benefit, the law has the immediate effect of creating for the individual at that moment in time an atmosphere or environment conducive to spiritual growth. The profound influence that physical environment can have on mental and spiritual outlook we are only beginning to understand, but the Manifestation has always understood this reality and has reflected as much in His laws. Thus, whether the law describes how people organize, carry out human relationships, care for their bodies, worship, or perform any other literal act, it is helping to effect spiritual development:

External cleanliness, although it is but a physical thing, hath a great influence upon spirituality. For example, although sound is but the vibrations of the air which affect the tympanum of the ear, and vibrations of the air are but an accident among the accidents which depend upon the air, consider how much marvelous notes or a charming song influence the spirits!1

As the law gradually enhances man's ability to manifest spiritual concepts through dramatic, analogical physical action, it participates in the largest and most important metaphorical exercise on the planet, the establishment of a spiritual kingdom expressed in terms of a societal structure. Seen in this light, the entire Bahá'í administrative order, its institutions and procedures are are dramatic physical expressions of this spiritual process.

Finally, many of the laws themselves are directly metaphorical exercises. When Christ wished to teach the abstract concept of love to His followers, He ordained a law that dramatizes this quality:

`You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you . . . For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even tax collectors do the same?'2

Likewise, while Bahá'u'lláh teaches us the abstract concepts of the spiritual equality of men and the unity of mankind, He also provides us through His creative laws the dramatic institutions which enable us to act out that spiritual reality with physical action. Properly understood and perceived, many of the laws of the Manifestations are similarly dramaturgical in nature, metaphorical devices by which we express with literal action what we wish to feel and understand on a spiritual level. Sometimes the understanding precedes the dramatization; sometimes the reverse is true. The point is that whether in studying the nature of the Manifestation Himself, His actions, His language, or His laws, we can observe the analogical tie between spiritual growth and physical action as each re-enforces the other in a pattern of continuous growth.

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If we can assume, then, that we have ascertained the validity of physical reality as a metaphorical teaching device and the fundamental logic underlying its structure, we can proceed to the final consideration, the

1`Abdu'l-Bahá in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 334.

2 Matthew 5:38-46.

necessity for such a process. For even if this process of spiritual development and enlightenment works quite capably, why could there not be a simpler, easier, less painful method of accomplishing the same task? Stated another way, if God is omnipotent and can create us in whatever way He wishes, why did He not create us already spiritualized, already in a state of understanding?

If the question seems presumptuous, especially in the light of having examined the divine bestowals of this creation, it is not; Bahá'u'lláh treats this question when He explains the following:

He Who is the Day Spring of Truth is, no doubt, fully capable of rescuing from such remoteness wayward souls and of causing them to draw nigh unto His court and attain His Presence. `If God had pleased He had surely made all men one people.' His purpose, however, to enable the pure in spirit and the detached in heart to ascend, by virtue of their own innate powers, unto the shores of the Most Great Ocean, that thereby they who seek the Beauty of the All-Glorious may be distinguished and separated from the wayward and the perverse.1

In effect, to create already spiritualized creatures is to produce automatons incapable of appreciating what they have because they have not discovered it nor have they experienced anything else. Likewise, were the spiritual reality more apparent on this plane, man would have no sense of personal recognition and perception, since this reality would be obvious to all alike. By veiling spiritual reality in a physical garb, by removing the essential reality of things one step from the vision of men, God has enabled us to have every opportunity to come to this knowledge and also have the bounty of recognition together with an awareness of the contrast between illusion and reality. This change from darkness to light, from ignorance to understanding, can provide more than a few moments of elation and reward; it can provide us with the impetus to continue our ascent and the tools of discernment with which to achieve that objective.

But perhaps the most important justification for the necessity of physical reality is the nature of the next world. For example, were there only two levels of existence in the next world, a Heaven for those who succeed and a Hell for those who fail, or even if there were various sorts of Dantean circles within these categories, then possibly God could create us already spiritual, and we would not have lost much. In fact, in view of the literal pitfalls we might avoid, such a creation would be much preferred. But in the Bahá'í Writings we are told that there is no static existence in the next world, no relegation to an eternal abode within some fixed state of existence. Whether in this world or the next, we are constantly changing, it is to be hoped in a

positive way, and the point of transition we call death does not end the process of spiritual development nor does it end our need to utilize the important and essential faculty of discernment with its accompanying tools of volition and action. There is no end point, no state in which we are finally and completely perfected:

Both before and after putting off this material form, there is progress in perfection, but not in state . . .

Hence, as the perfections of humanity are endless, man can also make progress in perfections after leaving this world.2

Even if we have not used well these necessary tools of spiritual growth, even if we have in this life neglected our essential nature, it may be possible to develop these faculties in the next world:

It is even possible that the condition of those who have died in sin and unbelief may become changed . . . Thus as souls in this world, through the help of the supplications, the entreaties, and the prayers of the holy ones, can acquire development, so is it the same after death. Through their own prayers and supplications they can also progress; more especially when they are the object of the intercession of the Holy Manifestations.3

This distinction between the concept of the afterlife as depicted in the Bahá'í Writings and the traditional conceptions of other religions is a crucial one. Were man's destiny to attain one unchanging state of being, one explicit

1 Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, p. 158.

2 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Question, p. 274.

3 ibid., p. 269.

level of growth, then such development could conceivably be accomplished by the provision of an exacting canon of rules and guidelines. However, since we are as human souls, whether in this world or the next, always in a state of becoming, a set code of behavior would be impossible for several reasons. First of all, we must constantly aim higher. What was admirable, impressive, and and progressive yesterday may be regressive today. Secondly, no two situations or people are exactly the same, and no guidelines, no matter how tediously drawn, could take into account all of these variables. Third, what is frequently required of us for our advancement is not a bold and courageous surpassing of our previous day's goals, but a finely chosen path of moderation or balance between two unhealthy extremes of response, such as the courage that lies between foolhardiness and cowardice, the joy between oppressive seriousness and insipid frivolity, or the wise guidance between unfeeling judiciality and permissive laxity.

In each of these cases what is clearly required is a faculty of discernment and judgment, not a blind adherence to dogma. Bahá'u'lláh admonishes us to evaluate our progress on a daily basis, and with each new assessment, we must

decide what is progressive and yet not so far beyond our grasp that we will unwisely frustrate our determination to strive. Likewise, no handbook to personal conduct can take into account the exigencies of every situation, and perhaps this accounts for the fact that Bahá'u'lláh revealed relatively few specific laws regarding personal behavior. What He did create are decision-making institutions which have the capacity to consider the variables in a given situation, and He left an abundance of instructional Writings which can help to foster this same capacity in the individual.

Simply to follow a code of laws would require great effort and sacrifice, but to nurture the faculties of judgment, discernment, and understanding, in addition to adhering to basic laws, requires a completely different kind of effort. At the same time, it can yield a wholly different kind of reward, the recognition of Him Whose Presence we strive to attain, and this understanding, as we have already observed, is part of the avowed purpose of our creation.

It becomes clear, then, that our development is almost completely contingent on our utilization of this metaphorical process which has been provided for our advancement. What becomes equally clear is that to learn how to use this device, we must rely on our own volition and, at least in the initial stages of our growth, participate actively, enthusiastically, but wisely in the physical reality which contains these analogies.

No doubt there are a myriad justifications for the wisdom of the physical universe and its capacity to teach us, but one final requisite for the proper use of this instructional device should be mentioned. Our association with the metaphorical world must incorporate detachment, which is both a quality and a process. As a quality, the term detachment denotes the capacity to use the physical analogues without becoming infatuated with them. As a process, the term implies a gradual relinquishing of our reliance on the physical vehicle to accomplish spiritual development.

In other words, detachment requires that our reliance on the physical experience be purposely short-lived. Like the water that primes a pump, the physical lessons serve to initiate understanding and other essential spiritual tools. But as our growth progresses, we should relate less and less directly to the physical analogue in order to understand the abstraction and express our development. In the beginning we are like young lovers, attracted to the literal vehicle which has conveyed the abstract feelings and emotions. We find it difficult to disassociate the idea from the metaphorical vehicle just as the lovers cannot differentiate their love from the physical expression of that feeling. But as the lovers mature, they must relinquish their dependency on the bodies to convey this spiritual bond and must recognize the true source of their attraction to one another. So must we in our development become more and more aware of the reality that is expressing itself through the physical world, and thus become less and less nedful of relating to that spiritual reality through the phrnomenal metaphor.

For example, we are told in the Writings of all religions that one of the most

dangerous distractions and detriments to our advance-

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ment is the love of self, which is expressed metaphorically by attachment to the physical metaphor for self, our body. When we become overly concerned about our physical appearance, we may be forgetting that our ultimate reality is the soul which is temporarily expressing itself through that corporeal metaphor. When we love that vehicle for itself or see it as synonymous with the tenor, we are becoming attached to the metaphor and forgetting the analogy.

To safeguard against just such a misuse of the physical experience, the Creator has provided us with a number of metaphorical reminders of our true nature and essential reality. The most intriguing of these is the aging process. At almost the precise point when our physical bodies have reached their peak, we are as intellectual and spiritual beings just beginning to comprehend fully what we are supposed to be accomplishing on this plane of existence. Stated simply, just as we begin to strive for spiritual growth, our metaphorical self begins to crumble before our eyes. We may miss the point of our earthly mission and attempt to become attached to our metaphorical self, but this divinely ordained process is daily teaching us that our attachment is doomed, that we are in the long run going to be detached whether we like it or not.

Thus, if we desire growth as our goal in life, the only kind of growth available that has any lasting value is spiritual growth, and if this development progresses as it can and should, the deterioration of the physical self together with the deterioration of our capacity to relate to the entire physical classroom, will parallel a corresponding increase in our spiritual faculties so that at the moment of transition from the physical world to the `real world', our final detachment from the worn-out metaphor will occur at the precise instant that we can no longer use it anyway:

The nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men. The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth. The purpose underlying their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High.1

1 Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, pp. 156-157.

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