The Spiritual Self in Baha'i Studies

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Introduction

Some Bahá'í scholars of religion have justifiably regretted the large gaps that still exist in
the fabric of Bahá'í religious studies. Stephen Lambden, for example, observes that "Many issues
within the history of religions urgently need researching"1 and "Some areas within the
humanities have been largely neglected by Bahá'ís. The various branches of theology are
something about which Bahá'ís need to be aware."2 Lambden states further on the same point:

Being philosophically informed is particularly important for Bahá'ís who are in dialogue
with persons concerned with ethical, epistemological, theological and metaphysical
issues. Too few Bahá'ís have to date grappled with this complicated but vital area.3

Lambden also comments that Bahá'í literature directed to members of the world's great
religions is also sadly lacking.

In relation to major religious groups, Bahá'ís have yet, for example, to produce adequate
literature directed towards Jews (18 million), Zoroastrians (100,000 in the world;
around 5,000 in the U.K.) as well as the many millions of Confucians (almost 6 million), Shintoists (almost 3.5 million), Taoists etc. The Bahá'í literature for Hindus

. Stephen Lambden, "Doing Bahá'í Scholarship in the 1990's: A Religious Studies Perspective", The Bahá'í Studies

Review, 3:2, 1994, 67. The sad fact of the matter is (a point clearly implied by Lambden) that very few Bahá'ís to date are interested in the scientific study of religion. The scholarly circle remains consequently quite small. The relatively small band of Bahá'í scholars who dedicate their work to these vital areas cannot possibly do all of the work required. The significant efforts that they have made, however, have broken the ground for those who will follow them.

. Stephen Lambden, "Doing Bahá'í Scholarship in the 1990's: A Religious Studies Perspective", The Bahá'í Studies Review, 3:2, 1994, 74-75.

. Stephen Lambden, "Doing Bahá'í Scholarship in the 1990's: A Religious Studies Perspective", The Bahá'í Studies Review, 3:2, 1994, 75. Lambden cites doctoral candidate Robert Parry's article "Philosophical Theology and Bahá'í Scholarship" in Bahá'í Studies Bulletin. 6.4-7.2 (Oct. 1992): 66-91 as a recent instructive paper in this area.

and Buddhists is very, very small.4

Other scholars have likewise pointed to the lacunae in Bahá'í religious studies. Seena Fazel has documented the still relatively minor attention the Bahá'í Faith has received as an object of academic interest. Fazel's study, states that "The Bahá'í Faith is suffering from a major dearth of academic literature."5 Based on his graph of the number of articles on the Bahá'í Faith appearing in indexed academic journals from 1970-1990, Fazel states that "the number of articles on the Faith will significantly decrease if the numbers remain static."6 Udo Schaefer also finds that the Bahá'í Faith compared to Islam which by its mid-second century had already founded its four schools of law (Ar.madháhib; sing. madhhab),7 has produced comparatively little specifically religious scholarship focusing on Bahá'í theology and metaphysics.8

Correlating the Knowledge of the Spiritual Self With Existential Theism: A Synopsis

This paper seeks to address one of those several issues alluded to by Lambden above. In so doing, it moves beyond merely decrying a gap, and initiates a preliminary discussion of what is potentially one of the most critical, but as yet largely unexplored,

parameters of Bahá'í
philosophical theology. As indicated, the theme of this paper is the knowledge of the spiritual
self and the possibilities of existential theism to further such a perspective. By the knowledge of
the spiritual self I intend three meanings. First, the individual's spiritual understanding of the
Divine Word or divine questions and the spiritual experiences of living-in-the-world as
progenitors of real self-knowledge, that is, the understanding of self and others as lesser divine
beings. Second, the knowledge of the spiritual self and spiritual experience which I view as
being one thing, that is, existing together in a symbiotic relationship. This symbiotic relationship
of spiritual knowledge and experience would appear to be clearly implied in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-
i-Iqán, for the Iqán presents the knowledge of God as intuitional existential knowledge; that is,

. "Doing Bahá'í Scholarship", 66.
. Seena Fazel, "The Bahá'í Faith and Academic Journals", The Bahá'í Studies Review, 3.2 (1994), 85.
. Seena Fazel, "The Bahá'í Faith and Academic Journals", The Bahá'í Studies Review, 3.2 (1994), 83. Fazel points
out, however, that not all Bahá'í periodical literature has been indexed. Although World Order is indexed, The
Journal of Bahá'í Studies is not. One can concur with Fazel this is "a serious omission". (83) The indexing of
The Journal of Bahá'í Studies would have increased the number of academic articles on the Bahá'í Faith. This
realisation makes the outlook marginally less bleak than it appears.
. The position of most Muslim scholars is that the differences between the four schools are relatively minor and
concern incidental matters. `Abdur Rahman I. Doi, professor of Islamic law writes, for example, in Sharí'ah The
Islamic Law: "If one closely examines the fiqh of the four schools, one will never come across any difference of
opinions as far as the basic principles of Islam are concerned. The differences mainly centre around furúát (tiny
branches) of theology rather than Usúl (the fundamental principles) of belief." (85) The four schools of Islamic
jurisprudence are: (1) the Hanafíte school founded by Abú Hanífa (d. 767). (2) the Malakite school founded by
Málik ibn Anas (d. 795). (3) the Sháf'ite, founded by Sháf'í (d. 820). (4) the strictest and most conservative
Hanbalite school, founded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855). For a substantive

presentation of the four schools of
the Sharí'ah see [title].
. Udo Schaefer, "Challenges to Bahá'í Studies", The Bahá'í Studies Review
2.1 (1992):26.

its epistemé and its ontology present the knowledge of God primarily as an experience to be
immediately apprehended by the soul, and not predominantly as the contemplation of an abstract
set of propositions or truths arrived at deductively.9 This ontology of the immediate presence of
the divine, the possibility that the seeker can be seized by the effects of divine revelation, is one
of the great themes, not only of the Iqán, but indeed of all scripture. The knowledge of the
spiritual self (self-knowledge) would here be perceived as the highest form of knowledge worth
possessing. Third, the knowledge of the spiritual self refers to the persona of the scholar as
hermeneute, as one who subjectively interprets the experiences and questions of spiritual life
from the standpoint of his or her vécu or Weltanschauung, rather than treating a set of objective
questions to be elucidated in analytical fashion, the more commonly accepted method of
scholarship. Such an affirmation makes self-knowledge the common property of both sacred
study and literary tradition.

I maintain that the knowledge of the spiritual self as a mode of reasoning and a
hermeneutic of self, the world and divine questions is of capital importance in Bahá'í studies for
the simple reason that it deals with spiritual anthropology, the life of the believer as a diminished
reflection of the "Self of God"(nafs illahí),10 composed of those divine attributes which, in part
or in whole, constitute the individual's spiritual anthros and distinguish the spiritual person as the
preeminent creation of God. Further, such an approach to Bahá'í studies alludes to the growth of
the soul in its continual evolution toward the ultimate and final goal of spiritual life, union with
God.

The main purpose of religion, as the Bahá'í writings repeatedly affirm, is spiritual
transformation11 which is but another word for enhanced self-knowledge. This

knowledge of the
spiritual self is not merely theoretical, however, but derives from and leads to praxis. It is more
importantly savoir-faire, that is, "know-how" and should be distinguished from knowledge as an
end in itself. Self-knowledge is thus more perfect knowledge in that it constitutes both end and
means. Any self-respecting Bahá'í theology cannot, consequently, afford to neglect spiritual
anthropology, that is, an understanding of the human person as both subject and object of

. This view that divine knowledge is derived from spiritual experience is a form of empiricism. I do not intend this
view in an absolute way since this spiritual empiricism is one that derives from the phenomenon of divine
revelation and is, to a great extent, dependent upon it. My comment about the "the intuitional existential
knowledge" of the Iqán refers mainly to those passages in which Bahá'u'lláh outlines the qualifications of the
true seeker in the search for God and describes the mystical experience of the divine encounter (pp. 192-99).
. Juan Ricardo Cole states the Self of God "seems to refer to the totality of God's active attributes, of which the
prophets and messengers are manifestations" (The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings 18). I have
identified the Self of God with the human being because of Bahá'u'lláh's statement: "Upon the inmost reality of
each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of
one of His attributes, Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and
attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 65).
. Bahá'u'lláh writes, for example, "...is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole
character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect
both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's
universal Manifestations would be apparent" (Kitáb-i-Iqán, 240-41).

theological and philosophical understanding. The intellectual understanding of such a mode of
spiritual anthropology well serves the method of correlation advocated by Shoghi Effendi, a
polyvalent method based on the assumption of commonality between the things being compared,

a commonality that is liable to forge links between the Bahá'í Faith and other world religions, as well as modern philosophies and movements. In this case the method of correlation links the Bahá'í Faith to existential theism.

This paper incidentally makes no facile assumption that the knowledge of the spiritual self (self-knowledge) is an easy task. It is not a finality, but rather a continual becoming. S?ren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-55) who "is certainly not a philosopher" according to Sartre,12 and who has been considered as something of a paraphilosopher, but who Wittgenstein called nonetheless "by far the most profound thinker of the last century",13 has said that "An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming...and translates all his thinking into terms of process."14 Kant, moreover, doubted the possibility of true self knowledge when he said: `We only know what is an appearance of ourselves'.15 In the light of this last saying particularly, one recognizes the monumental accomplishment of the believer who becomes the expression of the Hadíth of the Prophet Muhammad or Imám 'Alí and quoted by Bahá'u'lláh: "He hath known God who hath known himself."16

The Spiritual Self as Subject and the Objective Question

The three main functional tendencies or sub-disciplines that have emerged thus far in Bahá'í studies of religion are Bahá'í history, exegesis and theology.17 Some scholars remain

. Marxism and Existentialism, p. 370 Kaufmann. Sartre states that Kierkegaard himself refused the title of philosopher because he refused all systematisation which for him smacked too much of finality.

. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in private correspondence with M. O'C. Drury, in Acta Philosophia Fennica, 28:1-3, 1976, North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1976, quoted in Alastair Hannay, Kierkegaard, ix. The complete quotation is "Kierkegaard was by far the most profound thinker of the last century. Kierkegaard was a saint." How unlike Wittgenstein, however, to canonize the religious.

. Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, (79) trans. by David L. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941). Concluding Unscientific

Postscript is usually regarded as the
work that represents the point of view that objective reasoning is of little or no use in the life of religious faith.
As I understand the Bahá'í view, Kierkegaard's views on this question have been argued in extremis, but the gist
of his thinking on this matter is real and plausible.
. Quoted by Simone Weil in Lectures on Philosophy 191. I have been unable to find the source for Kant's saying.
. Gleanings, p. 178.
. By exegesis I mean the act of explaining a sacred text in the broadest sense. At the present stage of development
in the exegesis of Bahá'í texts, Bahá'í scholars necessarily have recourse to translation and commentary, although
strictly speaking, as Bible translator J.B. Phillips has pointed out, translation and commentary are two different
tasks. Translation and commentaries from the source languages of the Bahá'í revelation (Arabic and Persian),
usually rely heavily on elucidating the text in light of its Islamic background since a not insignificant portion of
the phraseology and theological motifs of Bahá'í sacred texts is Islamic in origin. Bahá'í exegesis at this point is
quite literal. There is usually no attempt to apply the meaning of Bahá'í scriptural texts to contemporary
situations, although some effort has been made to correlate some Bahá'í scriptures to the other world's religions.

skilled in and blend all three modes in their work, while others follow mainly one orientation.
Historical studies aim for a veridical reconstruction of the sacred event; text-rooted studies insure
faithfulness to the thought of the authors of Bahá'í scripture with learned commentary; Bahá'í
theology helps to ensure theological "correctness" and allows for a correlation of Bahá'í thought
to other movements and philosophies both ancient and modern. Yet all of these disciplines
remain basically content oriented.18 Content orientation assumes that the Bahá'í Faith and any
correlated subjects under study are essentially an objective collection of data to be researched
and elucidated in a meaningful way. Yet the net effect of these approaches, while they are valid
in their own right, is to risk becoming identified with `Abdu'l-Bahá's pointed critique of religion
as being reduced to "the noise, the clamor, the hollowness of religious doctrine".19 Moreover,
what `Abdu'l-Bahá has called "the discovery of the verities of life"20 and

`ilm-i vújúdí (the knowledge of being/existence)21 has thus far been conspicuously lacking in Bahá'í studies of religion.

The historical, doctrinal or exegetical approaches to Bahá'í religious studies, while they are making good use of increasingly critical and objective methods, and function consequently as a deterrent to dogmatism and an easy apologetic, have by their prevalence created a benign neglect of other capital questions such as practical ethics which `Abdu'l-Bahá has defined as "the fundamental aspect of the religion of God".22 Such approaches have, moreover, tended to divorce Bahá'í theology from the existential experience of the individual believer which in my view must remain one of the primary purposes of theology. The three pronged approach of the historical-exegetical-theological disciplines in Bahá'í studies has also resulted in a certain monotony of

Further, one must speak of Bahá'í theology as a theology without dogma, creed or decree. Since Bahá'u'lláh structured his faith without a clerical caste, unlike the religions of the past, any theological reflection remains strictly the result of the learned efforts of Bahá'í scholars, and their ability to convince others of the soundness of their views. At the present state of development of the Bahá'í Faith, there is no "official" institutional endorsement of the work of any living Bahá'í scholar.

. Even though I am aware of the limitations of propositional approaches to theology, my own articles have in fact been mainly content oriented. See, for example, my "Prolegomena to a Bahá'í Theology", The Journal of Bahá'í Studies, 5:1, March-June, 1992, 25-67 and "Propositions on a Comprehensive Theology" in The Journal of Bahá'í Studies. [...] It would be silly to argue for a curtailment of objective content writing. What this paper advocates is simply diversifying the field of Bahá'í theology.

. The Divine Art of Living, 25.

. Bahá'í World Faith 274.

. For the expression `ilm-i vújúdí see, for example, `Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of "The Knowledge of the Divine Manifestations" (157) in Some Answered Questions. Juan Ricardo Cole has alluded to a resemblance between `Abdu'l-Bahá's `ilm-i vújúdí with that of Plotinus' primal intellection in the Enneads, V. 3,2 and a similar notion

in Avicenna, De Anima, 248-49. See "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings", n. 149, 35.
. `Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that "the ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics" constitute "the fundamental aspect of the religion of God". The complete quotation is: "These [essential spiritual teachings] are faith in God, the acquirement of virtues which characterize perfect manhood, praiseworthy morals, the acquisition of the bestowals and bounties emanating from the divine effulgences — in brief, the ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics. This is the fundamental aspect of the religion of God, and this is of the highest importance because knowledge of God is the fundamental requirement of man" (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, 403)

method for a religion that increasingly demands diversity in a pluralism of meaning as it seeks to encounter the various schools of thought of both Orient and Occident.

Kierkegaard's polemic launched with Hegel and the Hegelians in mind against the speculative idealist philosophers of the last century23 presented a facet that sheds by comparison some light on the current state of Bahá'í religious studies. Kierkegaard argued that the speculative philosophers with their categories, finality, systematisation and historicisation of religious phenomena had neglected to deal with the most crucial issues in Christianity. Although Kierkegaard was somewhat strained in his polemic, and created ironically an entire metaphysical baggage of his own making, not unlike in all respects the speculative systems to which he was heavily indebted, he was correct in his observation that the philosophical systems of his day for the most part bracketed the most real and urgent of human questions24: personal meaning, suffering, anxiety and despair, peace of mind, faith and doubt, hope, happiness, spiritual rebirth and awakening, immortality. And divine love... where did such a vital reality fit into the philosophers' schemes? The religious subject, Kierkegaard maintained with good common sense, was interested primarily in eternal happiness rather than speculation:

The subject is in passion infinitely interested in his eternal happiness, and is now supposed to receive assistance from speculation, i.e., by himself

philosophizing. But in
order to philosophize he must proceed in precisely the opposite direction,
giving
himself up and losing himself in objectivity, thus vanishing from himself.25

While no grand systematising philosophers or theologians have thus far emerged
within
the college of Bahá'í scholars,26 Kierkegaard's remarks have a certain
pertinence to the current

. Hegel's absolute idealism was the reigning philosophy in the Denmark of
Kierkegaard's day. At the basis of
Kierkegaard's disagreement with Hegel, to whom he was in many respects
indebted, was Kierkegaard's assertion
that attaining happiness, or in philosophical terms the highest good, could not
be secured through philosophizing
alone. For Kierkegaard, ideas alone were paltry means in securing eternal
happiness which he viewed as the
highest good (Kierkegaard 19-20). Like Hegel, Kierkegaard employed dialectic,
but unlike Hegel's logical
dialectic working within a closed system, Kierkegaard's dialectic was
existential and expounded upon the
solitary individual working within the three spheres of the esthetic, the
ethical, and the religious. Kierkegaard
attacked not only Hegelian idealism, but Kantian moral idealism as well. He
felt that all forms of rational
theology were inadequate for a true understanding of the human condition.
. In inveighing against the systematic, speculative philosophers of his time,
Kierkegaard became the founding
founder of another form of philosophy, existentialism which spawned in time
both theistic and atheistic varieties.
It was Kierkegaard who coined the word "existential." [Kaufmann] [influences on
literature, psychology, etc.]
[controversy with his own church]
. Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. by David L. Swenson
and Walter Lowrie (Princeton,
N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 49. What Kierkegaard criticises
here is the annihilation, so to speak,
of the religious subject in the objective question. He argues rather for a
validation and discovery of selfhood
through discourse.
. With the occasional urgings one reads for the Bahá'í systematic theologian
to emerge, one has to wonder if such
a grand systematisation of Bahá'í theology would be desirable, even though
its accomplishment would be a
major tour de force. Kierkegaard maintained that systematisation corresponded
to finality but existence is

pursuits of Bahá'í scholars of religion. For, one scarcely finds any elaboration of a Lebensphilosophie or a vécu (lived experience), a Realdialektik that deals with the above issues in an existential mode, one that is, however, careful to avoid an uncritical apologetic and mere rhetorical effect. The approach that I advocate here would nonetheless maintain a secondary pastoral concern, but one that would be addressed primarily through didactics rather than homily or counselling. For, if Bahá'í theology does not illuminate spiritual anthros, does not inspire or improve in some way the life of the believer, then it risks remaining in `Abdu'l-Bahá's phrase in the realm of "Thought that belongs to the world of thought alone."27 It would be both real and ideal, however, were the writings of Bahá'í scholars at some level to translate into an enrichment of the believer's spiritual experience of the quotidian.

This concern to address the concrete spiritual issues of "real life" in a manner befitting philosophical discourse raises another question about the mode of Bahá'í scholarship. I referred above to "the persona of the scholar as hermeneute". Normally, one does not think of the scholar as having a persona (Lat.=mask; per=through + sonus=sound), that is, a vehicle for voicing thoughts. It would seem, however, that scholars generally adopt one of two modes of discourse: either the objective-detached or the subjective-engaged. I argue, however, that it would be beneficial to Bahá'í thought for the scholar to emerge now more in the subjective-engaged mode, as someone who speaks with a persona, that is, a characteristic and personal voice and style that befits an advocate as much as an analyst. The persona refers moreover to the individuality or characteristic being of the scholar, and the voice with which the scholar speaks would be from the real self, not the projected self. This real voice of self offers to the reader, in a spirit of intersubjective communion, the richness of the scholar or writer's experience of divine subjectivity, the experience of the self with God, others or events interpreted through the prism of the thinking, believing, living, reacting self of the scholar/writer.

In the analytical, objective-detached content approach that has thus far dominated Bahá'í religious studies, however, the scholar is not transparent to the work, but has subjugated the spiritual self to the objective question under study. The writer/scholar is not there, so to speak. Only the question is there and the elucidation of the question. When writing in the persona of spiritual self, however, one is essentially interpreting experience, rather than analyzing a question or detailing an incident. This hermeneutic of spiritual experience neither requires references to academic authorities nor the observance of scholarly conventions, although they are by no means excluded. In this type of existential writing, the author would be more transparent to the reader and less subjugated to the dialectics of the objective idea. This form of Bahá'í

precisely the opposite of reality in which new truths are constantly emerging (Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript 107). The current academic fashion of postmodern deconstructionalism with its anti-systematic bias goes against any current of systematisation, at least for the present. The universalistic content of Bahá'í sacred scripture, in any case, would seem to defy any one theological system to do justice to the diversity of themes and concepts treated in the Bahá'í writings. It is rather more likely that a number of differing theological and metaphysical thought systems will emerge in time and coexist within and around the Divine Word revealed by Bahá'u'lláh.

. Reality of Man 9.

scholarship would essentially liberate the scholar to move further along the path of intellectual creativity by placing the locus of the authority of interpretation within the framework of the scholar's spiritual perception. Put differently, the subjective-engaged mode allows the scholar to become largely the creator of his/her own world of discourse.

In this same vein, Rudolf Bultmann writes that it is a false notion to suppose that one has to suppress subjectivity and individuality in order to attain "objective knowledge":

Nothing is sillier than the requirement that an interpreter must silence his subjectivity,

extinguish his individuality, if he is to attain objective knowledge. That requirement
makes good sense only in so far as it is taken to mean that the interpreter has to silence
his personal wishes with regard to the outcome of the interpretation....For the rest,
unfortunately, the requirement overlooks the very essence of genuine understanding.
Such understanding presupposes precisely the utmost liveliness of the understanding
subject and the richest possible development of his individuality.28

The question of commitment also crops up in the discussion of scholar as persona. The
style of academic scholarship today requires a certain emotional detachment of self from the
subject matter. Indeed, in philosophy the word "emotion" is looked upon as a volatile alien that is
liable to destabilize the cognitive milieu. According to convention, unless one is engaged in
apologetics, the writer is not to openly avow commitment to the tradition about which one is
writing, if one is committed to it, although this commitment may sometimes be presumed. And
yet, religion is all about a sense of commitment. One is consequently justified in asking why it
would be excluded for this sense of commitment, without it becoming shouting, or preaching, or
justifying Bahá'u'lláh's deprecation of the one who "...clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this
Cause.",29 to be explicitly or indirectly voiced by the writer/scholar. The objective-detached
mode of scholarship, more often than not, tends to be a safe haven but demands no sense of
personal risk, judgement, disclosure or advocacy in its marshalling of facts or ideas, in its
juggling of concepts. It often gives no indication of where it ultimately stands, on what ground of
being it finally places its feet. It leaves no impression of the scholar as an engaged subject. In
other words, existential writing makes it clear that the scholar/writer is sitting inside the
theological circle, and is profoundly engaged not only in reflection, but in life itself.

When one raises the question of a scholar's commitment, however, one usually has to
raise the flag of caution against dogmatism because there is always the fear,

and the danger, of
the one slipping into the other. Karl Jaspers put it well, however, when he
said: "Man can seek

. "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, 47
(1950), 64 quoted by Bernard J.F.
Lonergan in Method in Theology, 158. (1971 by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, reprinted
1990 in paperback by the
University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute).
. The complete sentence reads: "In this Day, We can neither approve the conduct
of the fearful that seeketh to
dissemble his faith, nor sanction the behavior of the avowed believer that
clamorously asserteth his allegiance to
this Cause." (Gleanings, p. 343)

the path of his truth in unfanatical absoluteness, in a decisiveness which
remains open."30 In
reality, this validation of the persona of the scholar as a subjective
interpreter of the spiritual
experience becomes a de facto necessity because the existential spiritual
experience is situated
within a personal universe, the universe of the "Thou".31

The Self and Knowledge of the Thing and Knowledge About the Thing

I return to the question raised above of self-knowledge as praxis (practical
ethics) or
know-how, an empirical form of spiritual science that is distinguished from
speculation or
analysis. Such knowledge applies to both principle and practice. In this
context, Northrop Frye
has referred to a useful distinction created by Plato. There is the type of
knowledge that Plato
ascribes to nous,32 knowledge of things, as opposed to dianoia, knowledge about
things. The
knowledge of things, Frye says, "implies some identification or essential unity
of subject and
object", whereas dianoia implies a dichotomy of subject and object.33 The
knowledge of the self
or self-knowledge relates to nous, that is a direct, intuitive form of
knowledge with which the
knowing subject is intimately bound, a knowledge which leads to praxis, or some
deeper insight
or wisdom. It is knowledge which is intimately dynamic and alive, for it
consists of an
empiricism of spiritual transformation.

Similarly, Simone Weil in an outline of her lecture notes published as Leçons
de

philosophie (Lectures on Philosophy)34 writes regarding the injunction of the Delphic maxim
`Know thyself” written over the portico of Apollo's shrine at Delphi, which became a favourite
motto of Socrates, that by it Socrates meant that self-knowledge, in contradistinction to
knowledge about external things, was "the ultimate end of all thought."35 Weil comments further
on the famous dictum: "It seems to have meant: `Why do you have to come and ask me about the
secrets of nature, of the future? All you need to do is know yourself".36 She states further about

. From Jasper's essay "On My Philosophy" quoted in Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre, p. 232.
. For a brief treatment of Buber's notion of "I and Thou" see below..
. Reinhold Niebuhr writes that "Nous may be translated as "spirit" but the primary emphasis lies upon the capacity
for thought and reason." Aristotle distinguished the nous more sharply from the soul than did Plato. For Plato the
nous is the highest element in the soul. (The Nature and Destiny of Man, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941, 1:4-25.)
[p.]
. Northrop Frye, The Stubborn Structure, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), 74 quoted in P. Joseph
Cahill, "Literary Criticism, religious literature, and theology", Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses, Revue
canadienne/A Canadian Journal, 12:1, 1983, 55.
. Peter Winch says in his introduction to Hugh Price's translation Lectures on Philosophy that "The Lectures do
not come directly form Simone Weil's own hand but consist of notes of her lectures at the Roanne lycée taken by
Madame Anne Reynaud-Guérithault, one of her students in 1933-4." (3) Winch feels, however, that "there is no
doubt that we have here a very substantial presentation of what was said in the lectures". (3) (Cambridge
University Press, 1978).
. Lectures on Philosophy 190.
. Lectures on Philosophy 190. The pythia or Delphic prophetess at Apollo's shrine sat on a tripod and in a trance-

self knowledge: "The knowledge of external things has no real interest, or, at least, is of less
interest for men in general than self-knowledge. And, what is more, self-knowledge is the only
thing that gives any value to any thought and action you care to think about."37

While this comment is merely stipulative, Weil writes that the meaning of self-knowing
is ambiguous. She understands three ordinary meanings to self-knowing: (1) knowing oneself in
order to change, to correct oneself [transformation]. This would be self-knowledge as a means
while Socrates viewed self-knowledge as an end (2) knowing oneself in order to find out what
one is capable of doing, to make good use of oneself [the release of potential]. (3) Following
Montaigne, knowing oneself in order to come to know human nature.[self-understanding to
understand others].38 By a process of shorthand dialectic, however, Weil concludes that the "self
is a term which has no meaning",39 yet she comes to the ethical insight at the conclusion of her
lecture that "In all circumstances, to be a man, is to know how to separate the `I' and `self'. This
is a task which never ends."40 Weil here seems to be making a similar distinction found in the
Bahá'í sacred writings between the "higher" and "lower" self.41 Weil's `I' would represent the
ego, elemental or selfish desires and the `self', the magnanimity or self-sacrifice of the spiritual
individual.

Modes and Defining Points of Existential Theology, Philosophy and Literature

(A) Modes

Existentialism is just too diverse to be labelled a "school" of thought.42 What it is,

like state gave out her oracles. H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell state that "What the inquirer at Delphoi or one
of the other shrines took away from him was not the actual words of the seer, but an edited official record,
generally in different hexameters, couched for the most part in very riddling and obscure language, so that if the
apparent sense of the prophecy proved false, the god could always take refuge behind another interpretation"
(The Delphic Oracle 2, The Oracular Responses (Oxford 1956).
. Lectures on Philosophy 191.
. Simone Weil, Lectures in Philosophy, 190.
. Weil makes this claim because she says that one cannot "come to grips" with such concepts as the Will and
Intelligence. As for "emotional states", she says that "one can only lay hold of those emotional states that have
passed." She says further that there is a fragment of self that continues to

exist from moment to moment but the
term self itself disappears with time (Lectures on Philosophy 191).
. Lectures on Philosophy 193.
. "...self has really two meanings, or is used in two senses, in the Bahá'í
writings; one is self, the identity of the
individual created by God. This is the self mentioned in such passages as `he
hath known God who hath known
himself etc.' The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each
one of us has, the lower nature that can
develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. it is this
self we must struggle against, or this side
of our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help
it to attain perfection." From a letter
written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, December 10, 1947 in
Lights of Guidance, comp. Helen
Hornby, 1144:421. (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 1983)
. It lacks, for example, that mark of all schools, a recognizable system for
analyzing questions. There is no set of

however, can best be described as a style or mode of reflection, although the
metaphysical
existentialism of Sartre, Jaspers and Heidegger, for example, is a serious
philosophy with a hard
core. The existential understanding of Existenz (the life of the human being)
is accomplished
through a commonality of themes or perspectives,43 although there are great
divergences in the
way these themes or perspectives are treated. For the purposes of this paper,
however, it would
be useful to distinguish four general modes within existentialism. These modes
have all
borrowed from, reacted to, and influenced one another, so these divisions are
in no way iron
clad. Not surprisingly, even theists and atheists share common concerns in
existentialism,
although the treatment, as we might expect is different.

(1) First, there is the Christian theistic existentialism founded by
Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who
is the ancestral figure for post world war two existentialists, whether
believing or atheistic.
Although it was Kierkegaard who coined the term "existentialist", Walter
Kaufmann sees in
Dostoevsky's Notes From Underground (1864) the overture to the voice of
strident individuality
that was to be heard later in Kierkegaard.44 Some of the other prominent
theistic existentialists
are Marcel, Buber, Brunner, Tillich, and at the antipodes of one another,

Bultmann and Barth.45
Pre-dating these men, one can recognize existential moods in Pascal and Augustine, in the
Psalmist, in Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job. Indeed, existential theism finds its most ancient
roots in the human condition itself, reflected in the Greek myths of estrangement and loss, and
the Genesis account of the exile of humanity's original parents from Eden with its everafter
estrangement from self.

(2) Second, there are the philosophical existentialists such as Sartre, Jaspers and Heidegger who
are considered to be the fathers of post world war two existential philosophy.
John Macquarrie

common tenets or discourse that interprets the world in a uniform mode. In this respect, one could say that the
existentialists prefigured the post-moderns with their decidedly
anti-systematic bias. Moreover, existentialist
writers and thinkers sometimes draw diametrically opposed conclusions.
. See Macquarrie for commonality. Ironically, in true individualist fashion, several of the existentialists rejected
the label by which they became known, but it has nonetheless stuck. The commonality of existentialism might
best be compared to another movement, that of modern art. Although there are divergences among the styles of
impression, cubism, [other styles] they are all clearly recognizable as belonging to the style of modern art.
. This work of fiction of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1881) which features the bizarre character of the
underground man strongly influenced Nietzsche. In Dostoevsky's piece, the underground man thinks aloud in a
stream of consciousness fashion speaking his thoughts to a group of "gentlemen". The piece shifts constantly
from theme to theme, but is characterised by that extreme (and bizarre) introspection, subjectivity and intensity
that was to mark later existentialism.
. Although Karl Barth's prodigious Church Dogmatics (12 volumes, 7,000 pages) and his Theology of the Word
identify him as neo-orthodox, there are nonetheless existential dimensions to Barth's work. Unlike the Hegelian
dialecticians, Kierkegaard has emphasized that there was never any final solution to human questions through
dialectics. Barth was aware that revelation, the vertical line of transcendence and eternity, intersected the
horizontal line of human existence in time. This meeting of time and eternity was paradoxical. Barth believed,

against the dogmatician and the mystic, that our knowledge of God is never immediate. Over against Barth's
work which seemed to some rigid and traditionalist, Bultmann made his case on the basis of technical biblical
criticism and an existential dimension based on the early work of Heidegger. To some, Bultmann's works
seemed overly anthrocentric, even non-theological.

describes Jaspers and Heidegger as standing "somewhere between the confessed theists and the
confessed atheists".46 While Jaspers may not have been a confessing philosopher, he was clearly
a theist, but not, following a mistaken affirmation of Sartre, a professed Catholic.47 Jaspers often
writes of `philosophical faith',48 recognizes the existence of Deity and his `Transcendence' has
god-like qualities. Jaspers writes:

Man strives more decisively than ever for a certainty that he lacks, for the certainty that
there is that which is eternal, that there is a Being through which alone he himself is. If
the Deity is, then all hope is possible.... In the Deity alone there is reality, truth, and the
immutability of being itself. In the Deity there is peace, as well as the origin and aim of
man who, by himself, is nothing, and what he is he is only in relation to the Deity.49

This does not sound at all like MacQuarrie's man in the middle. However, with Heidegger the
case is more complex. Heidegger would not allow himself to be called either a theist or an atheist
which makes his philosophy vis-à-vis God a confused issue.50 Sartre called Heidegger an
atheist,51 but Heidegger was careful to disassociate himself from the views of Sartre. In his Letter
on Humanism (1947) written to a French existentialist, Heidegger writes:

Because we drew attention to Nietzsche's aphorism that "God is dead", they say that we
teach atheism. For what is more "logical" than to assume that anyone who experiences
"the death of God" (in the present age) is a thoroughly godless person?52

. John Macquarrie, Existentialism, p. 252.
. In Sartre's famous essay L'existentialisme est un humanisme which made the definitive statement on Sartre's
brand of atheistic existentialism at the time (1946) he wrote: "There are, on

the one hand, the Christians,
amongst whom I shall name Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics" (quoted in Kaufmann, 347).
Although Marcel was a professed Catholic, having converted at age forty, Jaspers was not a professed Catholic.
. in Macquarrie, Existentialism, 247.
. "On My Philosophy" (1941) and published for the first time in Kaufmann (169).
. John Passmore, in A Hundred Years of Philosophy says: "Heidegger's own ontology, however, is by no means
definite on `the Being of God' (488).
. In Existentialism is a Humanism, Sartre called Heidegger one of the "existential atheists" along with himself and
the French existentialists. (348 in Kaufmann)
. Cited in Passmore, 487. Nietzsche's reference to the death of God ("Gott is tot") was cited by Heidegger in his
Holzwege (234-35). Although Nietzsche was a professed atheist, his iconoclastic phrase "God is dead" requires
some nuancing. In Die Froliche Wissenschaft in which the famous phrase occurs, the phrase comes out in a
dialogue between a madman who in the early hours of the morning ran to market square with a lantern in his
hand shouted incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!". It was the non-believers among the townspeople who
mocked and yelled at the madman. "Wither is God", cried the madman. "I shall tell you. We have killed him —
you and I. All of us are his murderers." Nonetheless, Nietzsche's madman boldly proclaims: "There has never
been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us — for the sake of this deed he will be part of a higher
history than all history before." It seems that Nietzsche viewed the death of God as the ultimate sacrilege and
iconoclastic deed. Later the madman visits the churches, and when he is led out and questioned he says in a
prophetic and starkly moving phrase: "What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of

On the other hand, Heidegger wrote in Being and Time that "God is, but he does not
exist." Heidegger maintained, however, that he opposed only the narrow concept of God as the
supreme value, the one which refused to deal with God's Being.54 But Heidegger's ontology of
God (if God there be) remains decidedly problematic. Heidegger's `Being' is the closest thing to
God in his system,55 and despite Heidegger's best attempts to elucidate it, his Being remains
veiled in the mystery of an all-pervasive paradox. Heidegger often follows a

pattern of
affirmation and negation where Being is concerned. This creates the effect of such a detached
impartiality, such a silent apophasis, that it has the effect of an untenable neutrality and reduces
Being to the least descriptive, and least scientific, of divine attributes, the fact the Being is.
Einstein has said that "For the scientist, there is only "being," but no wishing, no valuing, no
good, no evil; no goal."56 This sounds like an apt description of Heidegger's God, for Heidegger's
God (Being) is scientific in the broadest possible sense of the word. It is reduced to the most
basic of all scientific categories, being itself. Even the values that Heidegger affirms such as
"care" (alt. concern, solicitude) (Besorgen/Fürsorge) are mildly anthrocentric and do not refer to
Being itself. Further, Heidegger writes of the paradoxical nature of Being: "Once "existence" is
understood rightly, the "essence" of being there (Dasein) can be recalled: in its openness, Being
itself manifests and conceals itself, yields itself and withdraws..."57 This description, however, is
not so far from Bahá'u'lláh's equally paradoxical and mysterious description of the Great Being
who hides himself within his own creation but who is everywhere visible at the same time, a
description which Bahá'u'lláh makes in one of his prayers as "...the most manifest of the manifest
and the most hidden of the hidden!".58 Bahá'u'lláh's paradoxical assertion about God, illogical
though it might seem to someone who applies consequent logic, is a wonderful (lit. "full of
wonder") definition of God as pure Being, that is Mystery Itself. In another direction,
Heidegger's quest for Nothing ("our quest for Nothing") strikes one as leaning somewhat in the
direction of Buddhist logic and ontology.59 John Macquarrie remarks in this connection that

God?" (in Kaufmann, 126-127) Ironically, Nietzsche's madman became a self-fulfilling prophecy in his own life.
. Being and Time, in Kaufmann 272. One has to wonder if this statement is mere hyperbole or a declaration of
atheism. The sentence is moreover riddling with its affirmation of "God is", followed by an immediate negation
"but he does not exist". It is no wonder that Heidegger has been subject to

such conflicting interpretations.
. John Passmore, A Hundred Years of Philosophy, 487-488.
. Heidegger's most important views on Being were elucidated in Being and Time. [date]
. "The Laws of Science and the Laws of Ethics" in The World As I See It and Out Of My Later Years, p. 114.
. "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics", Heidegger's fifteen page 1949 introduction addended to his
1929 famous seventeen page lecture "What is Metaphysics?" (Was ist Metaphysik?)
. A Selection of Bahá'í Prayers and Holy Writings, Bahá'í Publishing Trust of the Spiritual Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of Malaysia, Kuala Lampur, 1970, 62.
. For Heidegger "Nothing" is "an original part of essence (Wesen). It is in the Being (Sein) of what-is that the
nihilation of Nothing (das Nichten des Nichts) occurs" (251). It was linked to the feeling of dread as the fear of
death, that is, the fear of annihilation. It is here that we see clearly of the influence of Heidegger on Sartre for
Sartre speaks in L'être et le néant (Being and Nothingness) of "néantiser le néant" ("annihilating nothingness")
which is a word for word reproduction of Heidegger. What Heidegger means by das Nichten des Nichts is
anybody's guess, for why, one might wonder, would something that is already nothing, have to be annihilated?
As for parallels between Heidegger's thought and Buddhist ontology and logic, in Zen Buddhist logic, for

"One can scarcely read the books of T.D. Suzuki, for instance, without becoming impressed with
the many similarities between his version of Zen Buddhism and the teachings of existentialism."60

In his later works, Heidegger had the word Sein (Being) superimposed by a cross-out
mark, thus: Sein. This cipher indicates that even the notion of Being was inadequate for what
Heidegger wanted to say. Another possible interpretation is that Heidegger was trying to show
that Being and its negation (Non-Being) were inextricable. Sartre and Nietzsche are confessed
atheists, although as Karl Jaspers pointed out in Nietzsche and Christianity, there are certain
marked ambivalences of Nietzsche toward the religion of Christ: "His opposition to Christianity
as a reality is inseparable from his tie to Christianity as a postulate. And he himself regarded this
tie as positive — not merely as something to be severed."61

(3) Third, there is the literary existentialism of writers such as Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus and Sartre, a literature that tends, however, to be dark and pessimistic about human motives and the ability of the individual to overcome psychological conflict and live happily. Sartre, for example, completely explodes the concept of any meaningful existence, concluding with his well-known dictum that life is absurde.62 This literature is to be contrasted with the more positive interpersonal relations of Heidegger's Besorgen/Fürsorge63 (concern/solicitude) and Buber's "I-Thou" or Gabriel Marcel's "métaphysique de l'espoir" (metaphysic of hope). Literature is also one of the three main branches of the common ancestry shared within existentialism by its other two modes, theology and philosophy.

(4) Fourth, there is the school of existential psychiatry and psychology, founded by the Swiss psychiatrists Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) and Medard Boss (1903-19..) which has a strong

example, the opposite of true is not necessarily false. Affirmations followed by negations (or opposites) are not viewed as being illogical or contradictory. There are paradoxes, and paradoxes are valid expressions of truth. Following Zen logic, P may be both Q and R. "A is A because A is not A". The seemingly illogical koan of the Zen master is meant to transcend the duality inherent in the logic of: if P is Q, then P cannot be R. The Zen moment, however, is meant to transcend duality. (See David Suzuki's Introduction to Zen Buddhism, 46-50). With his alternating affirmations of being and nothingness, Heidegger calls to mind the Mádhyamika or Middle Doctrine School founded by Nágárjuna in the second century C.E. in which Sûnyatâ is the absolute void (nothingness) of all things and particulars, and forms the basis for both relative (Samvriti) and absolute (Paramârtha) thought. Simply put, all thought comes from the void. In western mysticism there is, moreover, the coincidentia oppositorum, the way or reconciling opposites in a higher spiritual condition in which both poles have participated, but in which only one pole of the discussion may dominate at any given time.

. John Macquarrie, Existentialism, 43. Penguin Books, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England). See also D.T. Suzuki, An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, (New York, 1964)

. Karl Jaspers, Nietzsche and Christianity, 6., quoted in Macquarrie, 19-20.
. "La vie est absurde". "Le Suicide". Life's absurdity was made more pointedly by Camus in Le Mythe de Sisyphe, 1942) The Myth of Sisyphus, but as John Passmore points out, at least Camus did not attempt to ontologize absurdity. "But Camus is not an existentialist; he does not believe that absurdity can be ontologized" (A Hundred Years of Philosophy, 491).
. Being and Time in Macquarrie,. p. 107. Heidegger was also preoccupied with the meaning of anxiety.

philosophical flavour and which has markedly influenced such writers as Rollo May, Eric Fromm, and Viktor Frankel, who have all authored several popular works. Even though American experimental psychology worked hard to divest itself of the influence of the philosophical overtones of European existentialist thought, the existentialist outlook has found a responsive chord in English-speaking readers of psychology, particularly in North America.64 It can be seen from these examples that existentialism in its various modes has influenced at the same time theology, philosophy, psychology and literature. Indeed, John Macquarrie makes the wider argument that existentialism has influenced not only these areas, but also those of education, ethics and the visual arts.65 In this Macquarrie sees a common thread in the existential worldview that ties several cultural elements together.66

(B) Defining Points

Some defining points of existential theism to be highlighted below in a Bahá'í perspective are:67 (1) Objectivity, inwardness, passion, doubt and despair in the individual's search for truth (2) Living or being-in-the-world (3) Overcoming primordial alienation from God (4) The personal mode of divine subjectivity (5) The existential moment and the epiphanic moment (6) The realism of facing self. These points will be considered in global fashion and in relation to one another.

In the search for truth, which `Abdu'l-Bahá has called "the first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh"68 and Shoghi Effendi a "primary duty",69 there is always a seeking subject. This seeking subject,

. "Existential Psychology" in Theories of Personality.
. See Macquarrie's chapter "Existential Influence in the Arts and Sciences" in Existentialism, pp. 256-274, in which he discusses also the influence of existentialism on psychology, psychiatry, theology, ethics and literature.
. In addition to the influence of existentialism in philosophy, theology, literature and psychology (if that were not enough), Macquarrie finds evidences of the influence of existentialism in education, the visual arts, and ethics.
See "Existentialist Influence in Arts and Sciences" in Existentialism, (265-274).
. I am here following the grand themes raised by several existential theologians in my summary below, but I have made a conscious attempt to perceive their concerns through the filter of a Bahá'í worldview. A more specifically Bahá'í treatment of such concerns can be found below in "Existential Meaning in Bahá'í Sacred History and Writings". Each of the six points above deserves a greater in-depth treatment than the limitations of space allow for in this article.
. The Promulgation of Universal Peace, 62. It is perhaps the deceptive simplicity of this teaching that has caused it to suffer a certain neglect in comparison with the scholarly treatment of other Bahá'í teachings. For a further discussion on the search for truth see chapter one "The Starting Point: The Search for Truth" in J.A. McLean, Dimensions in Spirituality. Reflections on the Meaning of Spirituality and Transformation in Light of the Bahá'í Faith. (George Ronald, Oxford, 1994) See also Gary L. Matthews instructive article "The Searching Eye" (Bahá'í News, September, 1989, pp. 2-9). In his talks in North America, `Abdu'l-Bahá consistently places the search for truth first in his sequential presentations of Bahá'í teachings. See, for example, his talks in Washington, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, Boston, Montreal, Sacramento, and on two occasions in New York, and also in his long exposé of Bahá'í teachings in Paris. See The Promulgation of Universal Peace and Paris Talks.
. The complete quotation is: "It [the Bahá'í Faith] moreover, enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth." This quotation is particularly noteworthy because of the italicized words. The

the individual, makes the spiritual world order meaningful for without the truth-seeking individual, there would simply be no application of spiritual principles or values of any kind in

the world. This seeking subject is a person, that is a living, rational, spiritual being who embodies the highest worth because he/she possesses the reality of the rational soul. For the dimensions in which "we live, and move, and have our being;...",70 truth would not exist without its apprehension by the rational soul. It is only the rational soul that is capable of apprehending the truth in its depths, in its profoundest meaning.

The truth should not be perceived, then, as an objective body of data waiting to be discovered outside of the seeker, for he/she is subjectively engaged in the process of truth-seeking. Under these conditions, purely objective theological knowledge or judgement becomes a quasi-impossibility. The search for truth is rather a movement toward the depths of the center of being, what St. Paul called "the deep things of God" (1 Corinthians:10). In one sense, the seeker is the truth that is being sought. Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out that "The self knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world."71 Although this statement clearly points to the agency of an outward or imploding transcendence that assists in self-understanding, Niebuhr implies that self-understanding and world-understanding are inextricably linked. Put differently, the catalyst of revelation will unfold the perception of the truth that lies both within the seeker's own soul and the world, for the world is nothing more than the enformed expressions of what already exists in the soul. The seeker's truth does not lie consequently outside the individual as a body of correct, contradiction-free propositions, but rather within the soul, and is disclosed in meaningful moments of discovery.
According to Kierkegaard, moreover, it is only to the extent that one's truth is internalised is one happy or unhappy: "The unhappy person is one who has an idea, the content of his life, the fullness of his consciousness, the essence of his being, in some manner outside himself."72

The process of truth-seeking is nourished, moreover, by a spiritual attitude on

the seeker's
part of active zeal or passion, one that leaves no stone unturned. Even a desperate search would
be preferable to the way of negative detachment, a detachment lacking the key ingredients of
sincerity and spiritual passion. Kierkegaard made passion a positive element in the quest for
truth, for it alone could confer certainty: "The conclusions of passion are the only reliable ones",
he said in a memorable phrase, and another statement could well apply to the state of truth-

search for truth is not just for those who are seeking truth in their pre-Bahá'í stage. The duty of the search
continues in the post-Bahá'í stage. "A World Religion. The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh" (pamphlet), a summary
statement of the origin, teachings and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith prepared in 1947 for the United Nations
Special Committee on Palestine. (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette: Ill. 1950), p. 9 (emphasis mine)
. This phrase is from Paul's sermon on Mars' hill to the men of Athens. Luke reports Paul as saying in The Acts of
the Apostles: "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said,
For we are also his offspring." (17:28)
. Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, 1:4-25. (Charles Scribner's Sons, copyright 1941, 1943)
. Either/Or 1, 220.

seeking today: "What our age lacks is not reflection but passion".73 In the Bahá'í Faith, however,
truth-seeking is God-seeking. In his epistemology of God, Bahá'u'lláh makes spiritual passion de
rigueur in the search for God/Truth. This element makes spiritual passion not an irrational, but
an extra or super-rational element in the search for truth:

Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate
devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and
the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be
dispelled, the mists of doubt and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge
and certitude envelop his being.74

One Bahá'í scholar at least has not been reluctant to mention the role of passion in Bahá'í

epistemology. In a talk on "Bahá'í Scholarship-Definitions and Perspectives", Moojan Momen
states: "I have never known an expert who was an impartial observer; the very fact that they are
expert means that they have a passion about the subject. So it is illogical to consider them as
impartial and dispassionate".75

Nietzsche in The Gay Science (Die Froliche Wissenschaft) in the provocative and intense
language that typifies his style, speaks of an age to come in which what he calls "preparatory
men" will "carry heroism into the pursuit of knowledge"...76 Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche's
"preparatory men" had understood that knowledge had to be pursued with an almost violent
intensity:

men characterised by cheerfulness, patience, unpretentiousness, and contempt for all
great vanities...Soon the age will be past when you could be satisfied to live like shy deer,
hidden in the woods! At long last the pursuit of knowledge will reach out for its due: it
will want to rule and own, and you with it!...For, believe me, the secret of the greatest
fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to live dangerously! Build your
cities under Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers
and yourselves! Be robbers and conquerors, as long as you cannot be rulers and owners,
you lovers of knowledge!77

. In Kaufmann, p. 18.
. Iqán, 195-6
. The Bahá'í Studies Review, 3:2, 1994, p. 55. Momen cites E.G. Browne "considered to be one of the greatest
academics on Iran that there has ever been" (55) as one who dedicated himself passionately to Iranian studies as
well as the Constitutional Movement.
. Nietzsche, The Gay Science quoted in Kaufmann, p. 127.
. Nietzsche, The Gay Science quoted in Kaufmann, p. 127. I take Nietzsche's bold and militant tropes to shock the
"lovers of knowledge" out of complacency and to leave no stone unturned in the search for truth.

It is worth noting in this context, moreover, that doubt and despair have a legitimate role

to play in the search for truth. Kierkegaard was to proclaim: "Every man who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the significance of life."78 Further, Bahá'u'lláh's phrase the "true seeker"79 clearly implies that no one would ever become a seeker if one were not in the first place profoundly dissatisfied, disoriented or disillusioned with the spiritual status quo and/or the state of one's own soul. For why would one become a seeker in the first place, if one lived in a state of self-satisfaction? The stages of doubt and despair which Bahá'u'lláh clearly has in mind to dispel through a setting forth of "the essential prerequisites for the attainment by every true seeker of the object of his quest",80 can be positively overcome, he teaches, through the practice of ardent search, spiritual passion, ethical discipline, and a spirituality of detachment. Doubt and despair which are normally seen as the antithesis of faith can ultimately lead to a deeper, more authentic spirituality if they drive us to seek a resolution of their cognitive and emotional dissonance through the dynamics of transcendence.

The existential point of departure is, however, the life of the solitary individual living or being-in-the-world.81 Existentialists hold that being, or more concretely, life itself (existence) rather than the world of the idea (essence) should become the object of reflection. Sartre says, for example: "What they [existentialists] have in common is simply the fact that they believe existence comes before essence — or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective."82 Sartre was, of course, a representative of atheistic humanism, and so designated himself.83 Consequently for him this existence could not mean any other than human existence: "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism."84 (my emphasis)

This vécu or Existenz of the believer, the lived experience, aims at transformation or insight, a shift in consciousness, or a deepening of the spirit of wisdom, dynamics that are ultimately the whole purpose of religion. This necessary connection between philosophy and life

as Lebensphilosphie is what lies behind Ludwig Feuerbach's remark: "Do not wish to be a
philosopher in contrast to being a man...do not think as a thinker...think as a living, real being.
think in existence.85 Feuerbach seems to be saying that it is life itself which provides the materia

. Either/Or, II (Princeton, 1946), p. 175.
. Iqán, p. 192.
. God Passes By, p. 139. Shoghi Effendi refers to those passages of the Iqán which deal with the true seeker (pp.
192-196).
. "Being-in-the-world" is one translation of Dasein in Heidegger's Being and Time and What is Metaphysics?
. Jean Paul Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism, 348 (Kaufmann)
. Sartre declares "Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative...". Existentialism is a Humanism, p. 349
in Kaufmann.
. Existentialism is a Humanism, p. 349. A Bahá'í perspective of existentialism would, of course, stand at odds with
any system that reduces the cosmos to the existence of the individual alone.
. Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft (Zurich, 1843) 78. Cited in Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture, p. 89

bruta for philosophy, a commonplace which we are apt to forget. This is suggested by his phrase
"think in existence." Philosophy cannot be, then, a flight from the quotidian. Thought moreover
reflects upon the concrete situation in order to elaborate its view of truth, for in reality,
philosophy found its origins in reflections upon life's common experiences.86 There is, moreover,
an inexorability about the life situation which cannot be escaped, and must be willingly
embraced for both spiritual transformation and reflection in depth. On this theme Martin Buber
writes:

But he will not remove himself from the concrete situation as it actually is; he will,
instead, enter into it, even if in the form of fighting against it. Whether field of work or
field of battle, he accepts the place in which he is placed. He knows no floating of the
spirit above concrete reality; to him even the sublimest spirituality is an illusion if it is
not bound to the situation. Only the spirit which is bound to the situation is prized by

him as bound to the Pneuma, the spirit of God.87

The life of the solitary individual in its relationship to the world is in Heidegger's word
Dasein, our being-in-the-world, literally, our "being there"(Da=there. Sein=to be),88 which
suggests an openness, an availability or sensitivity to the emerging, unfolding world around us,
or in Gabriel Marcel's word a "disponibilité" (availability) which "connotes openness,
abandonment of self, welcoming" of persons and events and which, for Marcel, is an expression
of hope.89 Existential theism does not, moreover, ignore or deny the malaise of the spiritual
subject who is in some sense dislocated or not whole because he/she lives in a world without
spiritual values.90 Neither does prophetic teaching deny or ignore the unhappiness and injustices

(New York, 1964). Feuerbach's theology reduced God to anthropology, (God is man) to a mere projection of
human self-consciousness. (The Essence of Christianity) Feuerbach was one of the Left Wing or "Young
Hegelians" who used Hegel but stood him on his head. For Hegel, man was God in his self-alienation. For
Feuerbach, God is man in his self-alienation.

. The very early roots of Greek philosophy lie in Hesiod. After his poetic, mythological Theogony (eighth century
B.C.E.), which deals with cosmology or the world order in light of the activities of the gods, Hesiod wrote Works
and Days, also in poetry, in which man, rather than the gods, occupies the central stage. John Mansley Robinson
writes that: "He is concerned with man as such, in his relations to the social order, to the gods, and to the
necessities of life." (An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy, 3). Robinson writes that Aristotle had named
Thales as the founder of Greek philosophy but states that it is unlikely that Aristotle had a first hand knowledge
of Thales' views. Robinson views rather Anaximander, a younger contemporary of Thales, as the founder of
Greek philosophy (23).

. Eclipse of God, pp. 37-38.

. Heidegger has himself explained the meaning of Dasein in the introductory key sentence of Being and Time with
this typically obscure statement: "Das "Wesen" des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz" ("The essence of being
there (Dasein) lies in its existence"). (p.42) Dasein referred to typically human existence and was the prelude to

the greater discussion of Sein (Being).
. James C. Livingstone, Modern Christian Thought From the Enlightenment to Vatican 11, p. 355.
. G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) wrote wryly and amusingly about his own dislocation in the world: "The Christian optimism is based on the fact that we do not fit in to the world. I had tried to be happy by telling myself that man is an animal, like any other which sought its meat from God...The modern philosopher told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the

in the world, but rather seeks to understand their root cause, pour out a spirit of compassion on those who suffers or are victims of injustice or oppression, and expose or denounce such pernicious influences. It is precisely because of this dislocation while living-in-the-world that the believer seeks a greater integration of spiritual values within the life of the soul and attempts to construct a Lebensphilosophie out of those events, whether dreadful or numinous, that impact upon consciousness.

The ancient philosophers and prophets were well aware, of course, of our being dislocated in the world, and the existential view, although it did not come to be known by that name until the post world war two period, and contrary to those who think of it strictly as an outgrowth of modern self-alienation, angst and pessimism, is really an ancient perspective of the human condition. According to Tillich, who defined himself as a fifty percent existentialist and a fifty percent essentialist91, existentialism dates back to Plato's allegory of the cave in which the human being finds herself estranged from the knowledge of true self which Plato equated with the contemplation of the Form of the Good: "But Plato's existentialism appears in his myth of the human soul in prison, of coming down from the world of essences into the body which is its prison, and then being liberated from the cave".92

This alienation from an understanding of one's self as an expression of the "Self of God" has given rise to the angst so widely mentioned in connection with existentialism. One feels lost in a meaningless age when ones does not know who one is. One feels angst

because one senses
the threat to one's spiritual existence, but without the knowledge of the spiritual self, one cannot
discover the cause of the dis-ease, and angst persists unabated. This is the both the tragedy and
the pathos of spiritual ignorance. The believer experiences consequently a primordial longing to
be at-one-ment with God and self, and return to the paradisaical garden or to be released from the
cave and contemplate, in Plato's terms, the knowledge of the Good which if fully compatible in
several ways with the knowledge of God.93 There is also in Tillich's statement, one of the basic
meanings of soteriology, the feeling of being bound and then being set free.

In Bahá'í perspective, this overcoming of primordial alienation from God and self would
involve recovering the supremely important notion of self as soul, already alluded to above, for
this conviction in the existence of the divine reality of the soul imparts the message of what

wrong place, and my soul sang for joy, like a bird in spring...I knew now why grass has always seemed to me as
queer as the green beard of a giant, and why I could feel homesick at home." 389-390 Religious studies scholar
and editor Jarsolav Pelikan comments in his introduction to Chesterton's extract from Orthodoxy that although
Chesterton "was not a scholar or a theologian but a journalist and the author of the popular Father Brown
detective stories" that nevertheless "in books on Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas, "and in two
interconnected works entitled Heretics and Orthodoxy, he defended the integrity of the theological tradition with
a vigor that many professional theologians and scholars could (and did) envy." (The World Treasury of Modern
Religious Thought, 385)
. Perspectives On 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology, p. 245.
. Paul Tillich, Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology, p. 244.
. The Republic, p. 227. Course on P. and A.

Gabriel Marcel called in his essay in Homo Viator "une métaphysique de l'espoir" (a metaphysic
of hope):

I spoke of the soul. This word, so long discredited, should here be given its priority
once more. We cannot help seeing that there is the closest of connections

between the
soul and hope. I almost think that hope is for the soul what breathing is for the living
organism. Where hope is lacking the soul dries up and withers, it is no more than a
function, it is merely fit to serve as an object of study to a psychology that can never
register anything but its location or absence. It is precisely the soul that is the traveller;
it is of the soul and of the soul alone that we can say with supreme truth that "being"
necessarily means "being on the way" (en route).94

To counteract this fear, despair and meaninglessness, existential theism summons up the
realm of spiritual values, chief among them being faith and hope, values that can be put forward
to counteract that "emptiness" which Rollo May characterised as the "chief problem of people in
the middle decade of the twentieth century",95 a statement that still holds as true, if not more so,
in the last decade of this century as it did in the middle one.

Existential theism moreover values the personal. It puts the person above the proposition.
"Personal" refers here to a perceptible, dynamic, interactive, and fully alive dimension that
glimpses into the intimacies of the drama of the soul and the transpersonal space shared by the
community of persons. Buber writes that "...every genuine religious experience has an open or a
hidden personal character, for it is spoken out of a concrete situation in which the person takes
part as a person".96 Believing existentialism looks at the universe as a dialogue with a "Thou", a
"Thou" which Buber expounded as a new epistemology based on the notion of Begegnung
(meeting/encounter).97 In all of the spiritual events that impact upon the soul one finds the
encounter of a greater "Thou" with a lesser "thou", a greater Personal Being speaking to a lesser
personal being, rather than an It speaking to an it. Buber writes: "In every sphere in its own way,
through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the
eternal Thou; in each we are aware of the breath from the eternal Thou; in each Thou we address
the eternal Thou."98

Further, it seems that as spiritual progress is made through the hierarchical spheres of
creation, from the lowest to the highest, the universe has a tendency to become more and more

. Gabriel Marcel, Homo Viator , pp. 10-11. For a further discussion of the metaphysic of hope, see Marcel's
"Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope" in Homo Viator, pp. 29-67.
. Rollo May, Man's Search for Himself, p. 14. Cf. Rollo May, Existential Psychology. R. May, E. Angel and H.F.
Ellenberger, (Eds.) Existence.
. Buber, Eclipse of God, p. 37.
. See Begegnung in I and Thou.
. I and Thou, p. 6.

alive, increasingly personal and knowing. Even Gaia and beyond her the whole physical universe
itself, seems to be regulated by a semi-consciousness, a ghostly kind of personal knowing. Gaia
seems to know what she is doing. Teilhard de Chardin has also pointed out that we move from
the impersonal to the personal in our evolution toward the Omega Point in which matter strives
to become spirit. This moving from the material to the spiritual in our evolution upward, is a
thought that is virtually identical to one of the points in `Abdu'l-Bahá's cosmology.99 Spiritual
evolution reveals then a personal, rather than an impersonal face.

This encounter or Begegunung with the divine, self, other or event takes on essentially
two forms: the existential moment and the epiphanic moment. The existential moment is
apocalyptic. It strongest psychological element is unpredictability or surprise. It is a sudden
meeting, although its effects may persist over time. The existential moment is accompanied by
various psychological states: suspense and/or surprise, confusion, anger, despair, anxiety, fear,
awe, reverence, or in Kierkegaard's phrase "fear and trembling".100 In its ultimate form the
existential moment brings "the sickness unto death".101 The existential moment radically alters
our consciousness. It leaves us for better or worse. It is in reality a disguised form of a meeting
with the alter ego, the spiritual self that is seeking to emerge, the potential true believer who is
now being forced to peel away the mask of the old self so that the new self

might emerge, a

. `Abdu'l-Bahá spoke on "the intrinsic oneness of all phenomena" (349) at Leland Stanford Junior University, Palo Alto, California on 8 October, 1912. This subject, he said, "is one of the abstruse subjects of divine philosophy"(349). The main theme developed by `Abdu'l-Bahá in this talk rested on both a teleological and cyclical view of the elementary forms of life in an "evolutionary process" when "a given cellular element or atom has its coursings or journeyings through various and myriad stages of life", until it finally reaches the human plane which stands at the apex of physical creation and thereafter reverts in cyclical fashion to the world of dust again (349). `Abdu'l-Bahá outlined the `Abdu'l-Bahá also spoke of the supreme necessity for this special creation of God (humankind) o live in peace: "Shall man, infinitely above them in degree [the lower kingdoms], be antagonistic and a destroyer of that perfection? God forbid such a condition!" (350) (The Promulgation of Universal Peace). Although the main point of `Abdu'l-Bahá's talk seems to be to give humankind its due as a special creation of God, and use humanity's unique gifts as a rallying-point for unity, `Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear in other talks that the teleos of the spirit is linear its direction upward. See, for example, his talk on "Reincarnation" in which `Abdu'l-Bahá says: "The return of the soul after death is contrary to the natural movement, and opposed to the divine system" (Some Answered Questions 286). My understanding of this divine system is that spiritual evolution is teleological, not cyclical, and its ultimate end is the presence of God.

. From the title of Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death. Kierkegaard considered these books from the esthetic point of view to be "the most perfect" books that he had ever written. Translator's note, p. 18. One can certainly agree with Kierkegaard since the prose is these books is free of that strain and passion that is so characteristic of much of his other writing. There is both a simplicity and a philosophical lucidity in the prose of these works.

. The Sickness Unto Death remains to this day the preeminent study in the psychology of despair and was very influential on the thinking of the existentialists who followed Kierkegaard such as Heidegger and Sartre.

Kierkegaard explains that the sickness unto death is despair. Since death would mean the end of despair, he

argues that "...the torment of despair is precisely this, not to be able to die. So it has much in common with the situation of the moribund when lies and struggles with death, and cannot die. So to be sick unto death is, not to be able to die — -yet not as though there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness in this case is that even the last hope, death, is not available" (150-151). Sartre, of course, went one step forward and offered his own solution to despair — suicide. See Sartre's Le Suicide. Critics of Sartre said that this book was responsible for the suicides of more than one French intellectual.

continual process that can be both acutely painful and challenging to the self's spiritual resources.
In this spiritual crisis, or "life test",102 one is brought face to face with one's own finitude, moral weakness or powerlessness to control and direct the event or more tragically to even recognize its full import. The event seems rather to direct us. In this moment of spiritual crisis, the experiences of the believer rise up in a confrontation with a sometimes unpredictable and hostile world perceived as other [It], but which the believer longs both to reconcile to and integrate within the self by a process of actualising inborn spiritual potential.

In the existential moment, the believer may also come face to face with the lower self, either in oneself or others, which Shoghi Effendi tells us can develop into "a monster of selfishness".103 If we have known the ideal self as found in the first valley of The Four Valleys (Châhâr Vadî) in the station of: "On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned."104, now we come to know the "real"105 self as "O QUINTESSENCE OF PASSION", or "O REBELLIOUS ONES", or "O CHILDREN OF FANCY", or "O WEED THAT SPRINGETH OUT OF THE DUST".106

Lady Wisdom teaches that before the believer can come to know oneself truly, he/she must experience the workings of both the higher and lower self, the one as an epiphany of glory, the other in its sordid ugliness and sorry ignorance. This coming face to face with and overcoming the lower self is one of the imperative steps in the development of spiritual maturity.
Herein also lies the justification for looking at the shadow side of human

nature: the presence of
the shadow means the sun is shining.

In the context of facing self in a crisis of faith, it is worth noting that in the Chinese
language the word for "crisis" is made of two symbols: one means danger, the other opportunity.
These two symbols are somewhat akin to the meaning of the existential moment. It is a moment
in which the fate of our spiritual development hangs in the balance. Bahá'u'lláh speaks,
moreover, of the fate of all of humanity hanging in the balance, as to whether it accepts or rejects
his own revelation, so it is something that is true of the collective as well as of the individual.

Such an existential moment is, moreover, the datum of the human condition, the given
which we do not control, the given which we did not choose for ourselves. But it is the given
which presents us with a limitless opportunity for growth, an opportunity in which the believer is
continually becoming when one willingly embraces an infinity of hope. Although the believer

. I have explored this notion of "life test" in a chapter entitled "A Paradigm of Spirituality and Life Tests" in my
book Dimensions in Spirituality. Reflections on the Meaning of Spiritual Life and Transformation in Light of the
Bahá'í Faith. (George Ronald 1994)
. The phrase is taken from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, Dec. 10, 1947.
. The Four Valleys, p. 50.
. I use "real" here as the elemental, ego-centric, materially operating self, not as the ultimately real self.
. The epithets are from The Hidden Words, Persian 50, Persian 65, Persian 67, Persian 68 respectively.

may perceive the existential moment as an alien other, as an It rather than a Thou, if one but
listens carefully, one can hear the voice of the Thou speaking through. At such moments of
crisis, the self is being offered the possibility of transcending its present state of consciousness to
more fully comprehend the divine purposes and to more fully reflect the attributes of God. The
contrary experiences of loss, paradox, suffering and eventual death which the believer
unavoidably faces in the world, provide the opportunity for the believer to

look for the silver
lining in the sometimes dark cloud of existence, and either to choose or to reject the realm of
spiritual values, to choose or to reject the teachings of the Word of God, to choose the path of the
insistent, elemental self or the ways of God.

The reverse side of the existential moment is the epiphanic107 moment. Also of sudden
onset, and by contrast with the weight of the existential moment, the epiphanic moment is a
moment of exaltation, of great illumination or triumph when we are possessed by awe, or in the
phrase of C.S. Lewis, "surprised by joy".108 It is Die Unglaubliche Lichtigkeit des Seins (The
Unbelievable Lightness of Being).109 This epiphanic moment is a numinous disclosure of glory, a
resounding victory, triumph or celebration, a hierophany that looms up large with promise and
exaltation. It is Bahá'u'lláh in the garden of Ridván,110 and all the lesser reflections of that
spiritual event. It is the believer winning the desires of the heart. It may be a divine healing, a
mystical encounter, or the certitude that our lesser will has become one with the greater Will of
God.

The moments of crisis alluded to above are moments of high realism. They take the
believer out the realm of the ideal and into the realm of the real. They make theoretical concerns
comparatively unreal by the imposition of their unavoidable stark realism. If, for example, we
have just been told by a surgeon that we have inoperable cancer, our current projects and
concerns suddenly pale into insignificance. If we have just been told that the life of a loved one
hangs in the balance, our present preoccupations suddenly no longer have the same significance.
The existential moment bears down upon us then with all the weight of its full signifying force.

A note of profound realism in relation to our own spiritual development was also struck

. From the Greek meaning "God manifest".
. Surprised by Joy is the title of C.S. Lewis' spiritual autobiography in which he describes his conversion from
atheism to Christianity. The title, however, does not describe Lewis' actual

conversion experience which was as
he has specified "not to Christianity" but to theism (p. 184) and which he has described as "strangely
unemotional" (p.179), for it was a conversion to the realisation of free
choice. Riding on top of a bus in Oxford,
"going up Headington Hill", Lewis felt himself to be entrapped in a suit of armour or a kind of "corslet". Lewis
became acutely conscious at that moment that he had been given the free choice either to keep this armour on or
unbuckle it and go free. He was given the freedom to choose, but he did not seem to be able to do otherwise than
to choose God. "Then came the repercussion on the imaginative level", says Lewis. "I felt as if I were a man of
snow at long last beginning to melt...I rather disliked the feeling. (same) No doubt these were the hard and fast
bonds of Lewis' former ego that were melting away.
. This is the title of the 1984 existentialist novel by Milan Kundera.
. See Robert Hayden's poem by the same title.

by Shoghi Effendi when he pointed out the difference between character and faith:

There is a difference between character and faith; it is often very hard to accept this fact
and put up with it, but the fact remains that a person may believe in and love the Cause-
even to being ready to die for it-and yet not have a good personal character, or possess
traits at variance with the teachings. We should try to change, to let the power of God
help recreate us and make us true Bahá'ís in deed as well as in belief. But sometimes the
process is slow, sometimes it never happens because the individual does not try hard
enough. But these things cause us suffering and are a test to us...111

Instead of making an "ideal preachment", instead of encouraging the believer to rise to
new heights of spirituality, as one might have expected from the head of a world faith, with this
statement Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) strikes a note of profound and open realism. With a note
of compassion, and without judgement, he merely observes that there are defects in the human
character, weaknesses that are simply there. He acknowledges, moreover, that the believer does
not always attain the hoped for end, a condition that produces suffering and trial. Shoghi

Effendi's realism, however, seems to lead to the path of an easier acceptance.

Further Considerations of Existential Meaning in Bahá'í History and Sacred Writings

I have argued above that a view of existential theism is both valid and relevant for the widening field of Bahá'í studies since it offers insight into the meaning of the concrete spiritual experiences of the believer living-in-the-world. The patterns of existential experience lie, however, not only in the life of the ordinary believer, but more importantly they are found both in scripture and in sacred history, in the acts and events in the lives of the prophets of God. The quotidian, sacred history and the Word of God all have existential meaning.

I draw attention here to two existential moments: one in the life of the Bahá'í poet Robert Hayden; the other in the life of the "learned apologist"112 Mirza 'Abu'l-Fazl. In the case of Hayden it was a crisis of "fear and dread", and in `Abdu'l-Fazl's case his conversion to the Bahá'í Faith.

John Hatcher relates that Hayden one day came face to face with his own despair when he experienced the unsettling realisation that his religious beliefs were not reflected in his poetry. At least, this was his perception at that time. This realisation created a form of crisis in conscience for Hayden.

> I sat in my front room one day when I was still teaching at Fisk University and was

. Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life, p. 20.
. God Passes By, p. 195.

> filled with a sense of cold, almost inexpressible horror, because suddenly something sort of swept over me: "You are not really dealing with reality. Everything you are doing is false because you don't really see the connection between what you say you believe and what you are doing as a writer." It was naturally a horrifying experience.113

Robert Hayden's experience bears some of the marks of the existential moment. It was sudden, personal and dramatic, and encountered Hayden in a moment which he

perceived in
some sense as a crisis of faith. It came in that same form of dread ("a horrifying experience"),
doubt or denial (in this case self-denial) which is so characteristic of the soul's dark day. As he
reflected upon what he perceived as a dilemma, Hayden gradually came to realise that his faith,
as contrasted with his beliefs, was expressed in his poetry as a "spiritual orientation":

Indeed, when I was less sophisticated in my outlook, I thought that the only way I really
could serve [the Bahá'í Faith] was by writing religious poems, but later on as I pondered
what Bahá'u'lláh had said about the role of the artist, I began to realise that if you really
had the new spiritual orientation, just about anything you did could be of service.114

There was, however, a beyond for Hayden's spiritual crisis, one that lead him out of the despair
that his faith was not reflected in his art, to a reaffirmation or strengthening of faith. The
resolution of Hayden's crisis of conscience points to that psychological adjustment which leads
to a more complete acceptance of self, or in John Hatcher's phrase, to a "pattern of consolation".

Sacred history is not merely the documented and detailed re-creation of the objective
record of events, but is also in a profound sense an intensely personal record, since sacred history
is salvation history (Heilsgeschichte) and revolves around the life of the sacred figure who is the
object of much devotion, as well as being the subject of considerable historical curiosity.

The acts and events in the lives of the prophets have profound relevance and symbolical
significance for the spirituality of the ordinary believer, for their mission was carried out amidst
continual persecution and hardship, both actual and threatened. The spirituality exemplified in
the lives of the Manifestations of God was consequently not merely theoretical but profoundly
authentic. For the present discussion, the forty year period of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment and
exile is ripe with meaning for a life of spirituality in the face of major tests and difficulties. It

would be a travesty, however, to look upon the two themes of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment and exile as a mere intellectual curiosity, either for theistic existentialism or any other intellectual current. Imprisonment and exile resulted in prolonged adversity and distressing hardship for Bahá'u'lláh and his family, sufferings to which he has amply testified in various passages of his writings. Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment and exile, whether it was the imposed exile of the

. John Hatcher, "Racial Identity and Patterns of Consolation in the Poetry of Robert Hayden", The Journal of Bahá'í Studies, p. 38.
. Same, pp. 38-39.

sovereign's decree, or his own voluntary exile into the mountains of Sulaymáníyyih in Kurdistan, affords an opportunity for us to consider how we also might face feelings of exile, alienation, loneliness and hardship in our own lives. Either by contrast or by analogy with Bahá'u'lláh's exile, we look to what both these twin themes might means to us in our lives and in our time. In the context of salvation history, however, one can immediately point to Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of the cosmic redemption of all humanity as part of the greater plan of God brought about by the untold sufferings and privation of Bahá'u'lláh. He declares that because of his woes all things were "immersed in an ocean of purity" [Ridvan tablet] [complete]

The two outstanding references in the Bahá'í writings to the existential condition come in the form of narrative theology in two pointed stories in The Seven Valleys (Haft Vádí) and The Four Valleys (Cháhár Vádí).115 Both theological narratives are concerned with the theme of the loss and recovery of true self in its encounter with God, alluded to earlier, as well as with the nature of true faith. The great literary critic Northrop Frye has written that this theme of the estrangement from self and its recovery is the grand theme of all of literature. It would not be, therefore, a unique concern of only existentialist writers, but of writers from all times and climes.
Frye says: "The story of the loss and regaining of identity, is, I think, the framework of all

literature..."116 Frye includes, of course, in his definition of literature, biblical literature whose themes and structures he has analyzed in great detail in a very creative and novel way.117

The first story is the one about the mystic and the grammarian in the first valley of The Four Valleys. Both travellers come to the "Sea of Grandeur", a metonymic and metaphorical phrase118 which is just another name for God. The station in this valley, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, is the station of the self as soul, that is the personal self rather than the philosophical self. This is indicated by the highly evocative transpersonal (intra-subjective) language Bahá'u'lláh uses in the text. As was mentioned above, the preoccupation with divine subjectivity, the self in its relation to God, is one of the main defining points of existential theism. This is also true of much of western mystical literature. Bahá'u'lláh says in his preeminent mystical treatise: "One must, then, read the book of his own self, rather than some treatise on rhetoric. Wherefore He (God) hath said: "Read thy Book: There needeth none but thyself to make out an account against thee this day."119 In addition to the reality of the human soul as the beloved of God, the quranic quotation cited by Bahá'u'lláh above raises the question of responsibility in attempting the challenging pursuit of self-knowledge. One must begin to read one's own self as one would read a book. One should begin to find meaning and understanding in the pages of one's own life. The theme of personal responsibility is moreover one of the cherished themes of existentialist writers and

. This mystical treatise of Bahá'u'lláh, largely unexplored by Bahá'í scholars, also demands some attention in order to develop an understanding of the mystical experience and mystical theology itself.
. Northrop Frye, The Educated Imagination, p. 21.
. See Frye’s The Great Code.
. Metonymy is the naming of a thing by one of its parts.
. The Four Valleys, p. 51. The quaranic quote is from 17:15.

philosophers. Viktor Frankl has emphasized, for example, that the sense of taking responsibility for one's own mental and spiritual health rather than submitting passively to

the outrages of
fortune is one of the precipitators of healing.

Bahá'u'lláh's snippet-story of the mystic knower and the grammarian will tell, however,
its own tale:

The story is told of a mystic knower, who went on a journey with a learned grammarian
as his companion. They came to the shore of the Sea of Grandeur. The knower straightway flung
himself into the waves, but the grammarian stood lost in his reasonings, which were as words
that are written on water. The knower called out to him, "Why dost thou not follow?" The
grammarian answered, "O Brother, I dare not advance. I must needs go back again." Then the
knower cried, "Forget what thou didst read in the books of Sibavayh and Qawlavayh, of Ibn-i-
Hájib and Ibn-i-Málik, and cross the water."120

Bahá'u'lláh then quotes from Rúmí's Mathnaví: "The death of self is needed here, not
rhetoric/Be nothing, then, and walk upon the waves."121 Although this micro-tale in itself could
become the object of some fairly lengthy commentary, there are three elements which link it to
existential concerns. First, there is the wholehearted commitment to the life of faith exemplified
by the mystic knower who is very reminiscent of Kierkegaard's "knight of faith", the one who
makes that supreme act of the will, the "leap of faith" (Springet), and summoning up courage,
walks across the water. He stands in marked contrast to the hesitant grammarian. One of the
symbolic meanings of walking on the water is the death of self, or overcoming nature, for to
walk upon water is not only to defy nature but to overcome it. Second, the story puts some
definite limitations on the abilities of reason to understand God, also a favourite theme of
Kierkegaard. Bahá'u'lláh's tale implies a strong critique of the powers of reason to put us in touch
with divine reality. The grammarian's desire to return to his books was in reality a desire to
return to logical forms of knowledge on which he relied, whereas the mystic knower's experience
of God is clearly in the realm of le vécu, that direct experience that

transcends and transports the seeker into some larger, more synthetic and all-encompassing experience of the divine, an experience that is based on more intuitive, non-discursive forms of knowing. For the existential perspective involves not primarily analysis, that is the breaking down of a thing into its constituent parts,122 but rather the holistic interpretation of a life experience in a spiritual context.

When believing existentialism interprets a part of life, it does so in order to interpret it as a constituent of the whole. Indeed, there is a holistic vein to the experiences and writings of the

. The Four Valleys, p. 51.

. ibid, p. 52.

. One of the dangers in an épistemé that makes exclusive use of rational analysis is that, like Humpty Dumpty, the thinker is sometimes left with the impression that the left over pieces cannot be made to fit back together again. Either that, or one senses that one has violated something vital in the process of the breakdown and is left profoundly dissatisfied.

existential theists, for they aim at some unified vision of the self with the world.123

In the story of the mystic and the grammarian, it is the heroic self of the true believer that emerges as the mystic knower casts behind him the despair and doubt that is left in reason's wake, and leaps into the Sea of Reality. By taking this "leap of faith" into the waves of the Sea of Reality, the seeker finds the courage to defy "the violence of logic" and the dictates of reason that command the protection and preservation of self, but instead of sinking beneath the waves and drowning, the mystic knower defies gravity, rises above and walks on water. One notes in context again the quick turnabout, the sudden great reversal. Instead of falling as in the primeval experience of humanity's original parents, the mystic know rises. The spatial metaphor speaks abundantly of the powers of the "leap of faith", that of the concerted will to trust in the powers of God, self and the search. The spatial metaphor of walking upon the water is particularly effective in this context, for the leap of faith has the double effect of creating space,

that is, it accentuates
the freeing up of the spiritual traveller when released from the gravitational weight of self
through the power of faith.

The Christian parallel to Bahá'u'lláh's text is Peter's attempt, in a sorry imitation of Christ,
to walk upon the water when Jesus came to the disciples in "the fourth watch of the
night...walking on the sea". (v. 25) (Matthew 14: 25-31) Like the mystic knower, who can
moreover be interpreted as a veiled illusion to Bahá'u'lláh himself, Christ bids the disciple to
walk upon the water, but Peter "when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning
to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me." (v. 30) The rest of the story is familiar: Jesus stretches
out his hand and catches Peter as he is about to sink into the waves and saves him. But Christ's
pointed remark to Peter is significant, for it provides the moral meaning to the tale: "O thou of
little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" (v. 31) The dispelling of doubt is also one of the object
lessons of Bahá'u'lláh's seaside micro-tale. Although the grammarian was a learned man, and
Peter an unschooled fisherman, both individuals were summoned to leave behind "the baser
stages of doubt",124 and to throw themselves into that dimension of faith which is not
characterised by philosophic reasoning, but essentially by faith defined as belief and implicit
trust in the Divine Power that is greater than ourselves.

The realism in the gospel narrative is also noteworthy. Matthew does not hide the fact
that Peter failed his test of faith, as he will fail later another test of faith when he is accused of
being the Nazarene's companion during Christ's trial. (Matt. 26: 69-75) Because he feared the
annihilation of his own being, Peter denied the One that he loved more than everything in the
world, everything except his own life. Happily, Peter's test was resolved, as `Abdu'l-Bahá tells
us, with untold remorse125, after which he became the petros, the "rock" that Christ had named

. Jaspers, p. 210.
. The complete quotation is: "O FLEETING SHADOW! Pass beyond the baser stages

of doubt and rise to the
exalted heights of certainty. Open the eye of truth, that thou mayest behold
the veilless Beauty and exclaim:
Hallowed be the Lord, the most excellent of all creators! (The Hidden Words,
Persian, no. 9)
. "Even the glorious Peter was not rescued from the flame of trials, and
wavered. Then he repented and mourned

him.

These existential moments should be viewed as an opportunity — and a
necessity — for
spiritual transformation. The tests of Peter, which appeared on the surface as
massive failures,
proved to be ultimately the means of attaining his predestined station of
becoming the rock of
faith. Also present in Peter's existential moment is the paradoxical note that
failure participates
profoundly in the means of ultimate success.

The other story, borrowed form Rúmí's Mathnáví by Bahá'u'lláh, is one of
the brightest
gems in all of spiritual literature. It is the story of the lost lover refound,
the story of the bereaved
Majnún who finds his beloved Laylí again in a garden. It is also pointedly
significant that
humanity's spiritual history, which begins in a garden in the Middle East,
finds its fulfilment in a
scripture written by Bahá'u'lláh, a modern day Prophet from the Middle
East.126 This spiritual
allegory of Bahá'u'lláh's is in one respect the complement and the fulfilment
of the Genesis story
of Adam and Eve which `Abdu'l-Bahá tells us is really a story about the
bondage and liberation
of the soul in its relationship to the material world and to God.127 But let us
listen to Bahá'u'lláh
himself:

There was once a lover who had sighed for long years in separation from his
beloved, and
wasted in the fire of remoteness. From the rule of love, his heart was empty of
patience, and his
body weary of his spirit; he reckoned life without her as a mockery, and time
consumed him
away. How many a day he found no rest in longing for her; how many a night the
pain of her
kept him from sleep; his body was worn to a sigh, his heart's wound had turned
him to a cry of
sorrow. He had given a thousand lives for one taste of the cup of her presence,

but it availed him
not. The doctors knew no cure for him, and companions avoided his company; yea, physicians
have no medicine for one sick of love, unless the favor of the beloved one deliver him.

At last, the tree of his longing yielded the fruit of despair, and the fire of his hope fell to
ashes. Then one night he could live no more, and he went out of his house and made for the
market-place. On a sudden, a watchman followed after him. He broke into a run, with the
watchman following; than other watchmen came together, and barred every passage to the weary
one. And the wretched one cried from his heart, and ran here and there, and moaned to himself:
"Surely this watchman is `Izrá'il, my angel of death, following so fast upon me; or he is a tyrant
of men, seeking to harm me." His feet carried him on, the one bleeding with the arrow of love,
and his heart lamented. Then he came to a garden wall, and with untold pain he scaled it, for it

the mourning of a bereaved one and his lamentation raised unto the Supreme Concourse." (`Abdu'l-Bahá, from a
tablet to an American believer, December 23, 1902 in Star of the West, vol. 8, no. 19, March 2, 1918.
. Strictly speaking, one cannot really say "ends" in a garden for there is no end to humanity's spiritual history on
earth.
. `Abdu'l-Bahá says that "It [Adam and Eve] contains divine mysteries and universal meanings and it is capable
of marvellous explanations."(p. 123) and he gives only one them while inviting the reader to discover others. For
`Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation, see "Adam and Eve" in Some Answered Questions, pp. 122-26.

proved very high; and forgetting his life, he threw himself down to the garden.

And there he beheld his beloved with a lamp in her hand, searching for a ring she had
lost. When the heart-surrendered lover looked on his ravishing love, he drew a great breath and
raised up his hands in prayer, crying: "O God! Give Thou glory to the watchman, and riches and
long life. For the watchman was Gabriel, guiding this poor one; or he was Isráfíl, bringing life to
this wretched one!"128

This little story is the ultimate allegory in the overcoming of despair when the seeker,
sojourner or pilgrim is suddenly surprised by the joy of the soul's reunion with God, which can
be viewed in another light as the soul's union with itself once it has discovered its true identity.
Bahá'u'lláh's mystical story of the loss and regain of the beloved strikes the triumphant note of
ultimate victory over the sense of loss of identity and despair. Bahá'u'lláh uses moreover the very
word "despair" in his spiritual allegory once the bereaved Majnún reaches the nadir of anxiety.
Bahá'u'lláh's narrative has moreover Majnún pushed beyond the limits of despair to the edge of
madness, or to the contemplation of self-destruction, when the trauma of lost love is too much to
bear for the sensitive soul. Further, one notices that Bahá'u'lláh's story does not hide us from the
most pointed and distressing elements in human existence: acute pain, loneliness, alienation from
self and the desires of the heart, and impending death.

Bahá'u'lláh's purpose in exposing these distressing themes is, however, clearly
therapeutic. The experience of such distressing emotions, Bahá'u'lláh is telling us, can be the
prelude to the healing and integration of self. The characters in existentialist literature, however,
often remain trapped in the morass of these disturbing states of mind. This has contributed in no
small measure to the endless despair and defeatism that certain forms of literary existentialism
convey, and have resulted in the partially justified reputation that existentialism is a dark and
pessimistic literature and philosophy. For, if as Sartre has said in L'être et le néant, (Being and
Nothingness), our only real freedom lies in the possibility to "néantiser le néant" (to annihilate
nothingness), then the prospects are bleak indeed. Bahá'u'lláh's allegory of the lost lover refound
even contains Sartre's notion of Huit Clos, of no exit, of the lover's being hemmed in on all sides
by the watchmen who are the symbols of all the conspiring forces of evil that have descended to
hem in and to harm him. Unlike Sartre, however, Bahá'u'lláh does provide us with a way out, a
door of hope, the promise of the lost lover who is found again. How this

process takes place fully
is the subject of a study in spiritual transformation, but Bahá'u'lláh's
allegory of the lover (the
soul) finding its true beloved (God) promises the tokens of God's love and
mercy in the joyous
surprise of the highest of paradoxes. The bereaved lover viewed himself to be
lost, whereas he
was, in fact, saved. His salvation is reunion with God.

The Existential Individual and Science

. The Seven Valleys, pp. 13-14.

It should be pointed out, however, that existential theism pursues no de jure
anti-
rationalistic, irrational, or chaotic approach to transcendence. It would
recognize in a Bahá'í
perspective, however, limits to both the arts and sciences as being the most
meaningful
expressions of the human mind and the final values in human culture.
Bahá'u'lláh emphatically
proclaims that neither science, nor the artifacts of civilization will save us,
but only His Most
Sublime Word.

Your sciences shall not profit you in this day, nor your arts, nor your
treasures, nor your
glory. Cast them all behind your backs and set your faces towards the Most
Sublime
Word through which the Scriptures and the Books and this lucid Tablet have been
distinctly set forth.129

It is in this context of the limitations put on reason that Professor Bill
Hatcher makes his
strong critique of existentialism which he sets out in his essay "Science and
the Bahá'í Faith" in
Logic and Logos. Professor Hatcher is motivated by his perception that
existentialism is an
enemy of science (logic) and its methods. Professor Hatcher's assertions about
some
existentialists' views of science (Logic and Logos, pp. 106-111, 121-122) might
best be
described as a half truth. It is true that some existentialists held the view
that the abstract,
theoretical and practical aspects of science were insufficient to fully awaken
the human spirit.
But this insufficiency view of science, Professor Hatcher neglects to mention,
is one that
Bahá'u'lláh himself also puts forth. Bahá'u'lláh puts severe limitations on

the abilities of both
science and the arts, as the above quotation from Bahá'u'lláh's
Lawh-i-Burhán (Tablet of the
Proof) clearly indicates. Not only is Professor's view of existentialism
"somewhat consciously
exaggerated at some points"., as he himself admits, (p. 108) but it is
reductionist in the extreme.

Professor Hatcher makes overly general statements about existentialism, all of
them
negative. He ascribes nothing positive to the theistic existentialists. Indeed,
he does not mention
one existentialist thinker by name in the essay, so it is difficult to
determine exactly to whom he
refers. Hatcher says, for example: "It [the existential religious experience]
must strike like
lightening for reasons which are never wholly clear or else as the result of
some magic or occult
practice. Clearly no experience of such an erratic and unstable nature can ever
serve as the basis
for a progressive society." (121-122) This is indeed a strange statement to
make in the view of
the fact that existential psychologists and psychiatrists are devoted to the
healing of the mind. To
associate existentialism with magic or the occult, however, is highly
exaggerated. Hatcher's
dismissal of existentialist religious experience is based on two charges: (i)
"the existentialist
grants that science cannot be applied to religion". (ii) "He values this
subjective aspect of
religion above science and its method." (p. 108) If the existentialist values
religion above
science, then I rather suspect most Bahá'ís are existentialist as well.
Further, Professor Hatcher
fails to mention that Karl Jaspers, one of the founders of post world war two
existentialism,
clearly valued both science and reason, views he set forth in Reason and
Anti-Reason in our
Time, although Jaspers did recognize some of its limitations. And why indeed
should he not?

. Tablets, p. 211.

Only those who view science as some kind of absolute might argue that science
deserves to be
put above any reproach. Einstein, however, like `Abdu'l-Bahá, deplored "the
malignant fruits of
science." [`Abdu'l-Bahá, source] Even those existentialist philosophers who

critiqued science,
like Heidegger, were not de jure enemies of science. What they deplored was that the partial and
limited abilities of science to decipher total reality were becoming the object of absolutistic
claims for its abilities. Moreover, it is not excluded that one use both analytical (logical) and
existential (subjective) approaches to religious knowledge. The very way that Professor Hatcher
describes existentialist religious experience as "private", "emotional" "uncommunicable" [sic]
"even chaotic" and "unsystematic" as driving a wedge between science and religion (p. 107) is an
implied critique of the experience, and is not tenable. The fact that religious experience is
private, emotional and at times uncommunicable is a valid, enriching and meaningful aspect of
religious experience. We are not duty-bound to apply scientific method to our religious
experiences in order to test their validity, as Professor Hatcher suggests, for such an approach
reduces the experience of the divine to the controlled experiment, that is, to something to be
manipulated. Third, there is the notion of divine subjectivity to which I have referred several
times and which has lead, incidentally, to the criticism that existential writers — -and this
criticism has also been levelled at the mystics — -are overly preoccupied with self.130 This
criticism is being raised only to dismiss it, for clearly we had better be preoccupied with an
understanding of true self if we are to make real spiritual progress. The inscription once written
above Apollo's shrine at Delphi (“know thyself”) stands as both an eternal reminder and a
challenge for all souls to make that longest of voyages, the journey into the unknown reaches of
the inner self.

Here I share Kierkegaard's view that the objectivity of the physical sciences takes us in a
direction that moves away from personal truth. But the nature of the scientific enterprise is to
objectify and with objectification we move away from the subjectivity that seeks enlightenment
in ethics and religion, in the search for faith, meaning and values. Personal truth, on the other

hand, is what moves toward the human being. It is what gives the human being profound and
personal meaning; that is, a dynamic that is capable of altering lives, profoundly changing
consciousness, moulding behaviour, or bestowing a depth of meaning, or hallowing existence.

. A.J. Paton, for example, wrote in The Modern Predicament that Kierkegaard was "self-centered" and that "he
hardly ever thinks of anyone but himself." (p. 120) Although Paton's critique warns of the danger of egotism, it is
not substantial because Kierkegaard and others who speak in this mode are not just speaking of subjectivity but
of intersubjectivity, whether that be with God or with others. (Macquarrie, p. 280)

— The Spiritual Self in Baha'i Studies (Used by permission of the curator)