

are stations or points of view (maqam) within the belief in divine unity (tawhid; n.d., pp. 105-16; cf. University of Leiden, ms. Or. 4971). On the origin of the world, Baha'-Allah stated that both the traditional views (one that the world has a point of origin and will have an end, the other that the world has neither a beginning nor an end) are correct and that the differences arise from variations in men's hearts (al-af'eda) and points of view (al-anzar; 1980, p. 82). Finally, on the controversy within Islam over the attributes of God, whether they are eternal and un-created or are created in time, 'Abd-al-Baha' provided the analysis referred to above (1330/1912, p. 48).

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This relativism has resulted in an important difference between the Bahai faith and both Islam and Christianity. Whereas adherents of these two religions maintain that they have access to a source of absolute truth through Christ or the Koran, Bahai writers maintain that all entities in the phenomenal world are contingent and not enduring. This difference has thus produced a further difference, in definition of the nature of time. In Islam and Christianity time is seen only in relation to particular hieratic irruptions into profane time, such as the advent of Christ or Mohammad and the Day of Judgment. In the period between these two events time in effect stands still, for it does not matter whether one lives one hundred or one thousand years after Christ or Mohammad; everything has the same relations backward to the revelatory event in the past and forward to the apocalyptic event in the future. In the Bahai view, however, human society evolves and develops. The religious teachings of the major prophets are therefore not absolute and for all time but are, rather, relevant to a particular time and have aspects that may be subject to a decline in relevance over the course of centuries (1984, no. 38, p. 63; tr. p. 87-88).

Finally, it remains to consider the consequences of this metaphysical relativism in the Bahai faith. First, much religious debate and conflict in other religions has revolved around metaphysical questions. In the Bahai faith, however, as noted above, all metaphysical points of view, and therefore dogmatic positions, are considered ultimately to be purely relative to a particular individual or society for a particular time and therefore without universal validity. There must therefore be a change of emphasis in what is considered important in religion, and the doctrinal and soteriological importance of metaphysics is considerably less. Interest is no longer primarily in the structures of metaphysics but rather in relationships. That is, the focus of interest is no longer primarily on knowledge of what reality is but on the practical consequences of the individual's relationship with reality. It has shifted from structures to relationships, and ethics and social action are thus the prime considerations. This focus is what would be expected and is in fact found in the Bahai faith, where questions of metaphysics and dogmatic theology have been little considered. There is almost no literature on the subject, though there is much discussion and writing on social and ethical

issues.

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