

hermeneutics, its claim to achieve objective truth. Other thinkers, such as Jürgen Habermas, have defended the objectivity of modern approaches to interpretation.(1) The later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, a philosopher, also took issue with the idea that there was one hermeneutic strategy that could alone yield objective truth; rather, Wittgenstein argued that interpretive approaches should be understood as language-games that grow out of a community of interpretation and meaning, and that religious and other metaphysical language is truly meaningful, and not nonsense as the logical empiricists contended. Wittgenstein has been seen by many as the founding father of postmodernist philosophy, a thorough-going attack on the tyranny of Enlightenment rationality in favour of local knowledge traditions and a recognition of the multiple and contradictory meanings contained within any text.(2)

On the surface, the interpretive world of the central Bahá'í texts, with their background in medieval Middle Eastern thought, is far removed from these modern concerns. In fact, contemporary movements of thought are seldom as entirely unprecedented as their adherents like to believe, and these debates were also echoed in the Greco-Islamic traditions of knowledge that form the background of Bahá'í texts. What are some interpretive principles delineated in the Bahá'í writings? Can points of intersection be established between any of these modern (or postmodern) approaches to hermeneutics and Bahá'í strategies of interpretation? Some confusion has occurred among English-speaking Bahá'ís because we ordinarily use only one word, "interpret," to cover several distinct activities recognized in Arabic and Persian. Another source of confusion lies in the distinction that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá make in the way that religious and spiritual texts are to be approached, as opposed to the interpretation of legal texts. Finally, the type of interpretation depends on who is doing the interpreting. In what follows, I by no means exhaust the types of interpretive activities authorised by Bahá'í texts, but I do discuss some major approaches and the technical terms for them employed in the original Arabic or Persian.

Scriptural texts

With regard to spiritual or religious texts, two sorts of interpretive activity are recognized for ordinary believers. The first is the subjective, figurative interpretation of scripture, called in Arabic "ta'wíl." Figurative interpretation seeks the spiritual or esoteric meaning of a text, looking beyond the surface meaning. This approach was especially identified with Sufism and Ismailism in Islam, and some aspects of it were probably influenced by Hellenistic Gnosticism.(3) In Bahá'u'lláh's Book of Certitude, when He interprets the signs of Jesus's return, including the darkening of the sun and moon and the falling of the stars to earth, in a figurative manner, He is practicing ta'wíl.(4) Bahá'u'lláh

said that such non-literal explication of a text (including the Bahá'í scriptures) is legitimate with regard to eschatology, messianic prophecies, and other divine verses that had no legal or ritual import.(5)

Bahá'u'lláh recognises that such a subjective approach may result in theological differences among the believers, but urges them to be tolerant of this diversity in views, since it derives from their different spiritual stations. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh quotes approvingly Shí'í sayings that each revealed verse has seventy or seventy-one meanings.(6)

The recognition of the validity of individual figurative or esoteric interpretation of certain kinds of scripture represents an implicit denial of the assumption in Dilthey's modern hermeneutics that one can discover the sole, objective truth of a text. Rather, verses of scripture are seen as polyvalent or holding multiple meanings.

Another approach to understanding scripture is formal scripture commentary or exegesis (tafsír), which strives to be less subjective and which is best accomplished with a knowledge of the original languages in which the scripture was written, their grammar, technical terms, and cultural background. For instance, let us take the phrase in The Most Holy Book, "Whoso layeth claim to a Revelation direct from God, ere the expiration of a full thousand years, such a man is assuredly a lying impostor."(7) A formal commentary would show interest in the original Arabic word for "claim" and its connotations, and in the precise meaning of the original Arabic word for Revelation. Later in this passage Bahá'u'lláh goes on to forbid any figurative approach (ta'wíl) to this verse; that is, someone could not legitimately say that the "thousand years" is symbolic of "a thousand days."

In Islam, most schools favoured either subjective, often metaphorical hermeneutics (ta'wíl) or a more philological or rationalist formal commentary (tafsír). The former was most often chosen by Sufi mystics and by esoteric movements such as the Isma'ilis. The latter was characteristic of the clerical culture of literate, urban Islam, whether Sunni or Twelver Shí'í. Proponents of these two methods fought with one another bitterly in medieval Islam, but, remarkably, Bahá'u'lláh authorises both approaches. Bahá'u'lláh disapproved of formal commentary that became too literal-minded and lost the spiritual dimension. On the other hand, he warned against esoteric interpretation or ta'wíl that went so far as to subvert or even contradict the outward meaning of the text. He urged a balance between a concern with the inward meaning and a concentration on the outward meaning.(8)

In Persian, of course, there is already a large exegetic literature, produced by eminent scholars such as 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari.(9)

Relatively little Bahá'í exegesis has yet been undertaken in Western languages, though Adib Taherzadeh's study of Bahá'u'lláh's

major Tablets would fall under this rubric, as would many articles that have appeared in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* (edited by Stephen Lambden); we might also stretch this genre to include the works of such academics as Todd Lawson and Christopher Buck.(10) Exegesis requires technical linguistic and philological skills, and its Bahá'í practitioners fall into the category of learned in Bahá', who were so praised by Bahá'u'lláh.(11) But their commentaries remain a sort of individual interpretation, with no special coercive authority.

Figurative interpretation and scripture exegesis are the two major forms of interpretation referred to in Bahá'u'lláh's works. Although I have included some recent works by Bahá'í academics in Western universities under the rubric of formal scripture commentary, the academic approach is in fact a new and distinct set of methodologies. Classical tafsír was concerned with contextualising Qur'ánic verses only in an anecdotal and uncritical way, and paid no attention to social or economic context or to the often Syriac or other non-Arab etymologies of some key Qur'ánic technical terms. Contemporary academic scholarship takes advantage of all the advances in historical linguistics, in sociology and anthropology, and in modern historiographical technique, which pays special attention weighting sources, to forms of textual analysis, to the hermeneutic circle, to contextualisation, and to change over time. Medieval commentators often assumed that the Qur'án was an eternal text, almost a Platonic form, that was mechanically "revealed" to the Prophet, whereas academics, even believers, would see revelation as working itself out in history. 'Abdu'l-Bahá saw society's need for such academic experts in his 1875 *Secret of Divine Civilization*.(12) In later years he affirmed that "We regard knowledge and wisdom as the foundation of the progress of mankind, and extol philosophers that are endowed with broad vision."(13) Since the Bahá'í Faith recognises freedom of conscience, Bahá'í scriptural commentary by individuals can gain popularity only by convincing its audience, not by being imposed from above.

Figurative interpretation, formal exegesis, and academic writing on the Bahá'í Faith all appear to fall under the category established by Shoghi Effendi, of "individual interpretation." The permissibility of individual interpretation has been affirmed by both Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. While denying the right of any individual to impose his or her views, Shoghi Effendi wrote, "I have no objection to your interpretations and inferences so long as they are represented as your own personal observations and reflections."(14) The Universal House of Justice also affirmed that "such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes

it clear that his views are merely his own."(15)

Such individual interpretation is not supposed to contradict the clear text of the Bahá'í scriptures. Still, not all texts are clear.

And the authorisation of diverse individual interpretations seems to be a recognition that religious truth is difficult to standardise. This leeway for individual interpretation seems to me to accord better with postmodern conceptions of knowledge as fragmented, discontinuous and local than with Enlightenment conceptions of a single rationalist master narrative.

Another, very different sort of interpretation with regard to non-legal texts is authoritative interpretation (tabyín). Bahá'u'lláh instituted this function in The Most Holy Book, when he commanded Bahá'ís after His Ascension, "refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him ['Abdu'l-Bahá] Who hath branched from this mighty Stock."(16) Only two individuals

have held or ever will hold this function in the Bahá'í community, Bahá'u'lláh's eldest Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson, Shoghi Effendi.(17) 'Abdu'l-Bahá has commented on a large number of Bahá'u'lláh's verses.

Shoghi Effendi's interpretations tended to concentrate on social and administrative

principles, and on the meaning of history, and aside from "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" he rarely treated purely theological verses.(18)

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi both commented on an issue, they did not always give the same interpretation.(19)

Such discrepancies point to the need for further scholarly study, and suggest the need for the development of a hermeneutical approach even to authoritative interpretive comments. All in all, the corpus of official interpretation helps Bahá'ís understand important aspects of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, but leaves wide scope for continuing investigation of the holy writ by individuals.

Legal texts

Legal texts are treated in an altogether different fashion by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In the first place, figurative interpretation (ta'wíl) of legal commands is forbidden in The Most Holy Book.(20) Bahá'u'lláh

explains elsewhere that whereas figurative interpretation may be an appropriate approach to some passages, it is strictly proscribed with regard to law and ritual. One may not neglect to perform one's ablutions with physical water before praying on the grounds that one has washed one's soul with the water of mystical insight instead.(21)

There are many instances, however, in which a legal text is not entirely clear or does not appear to cover every situation neatly. Depending upon the circumstances, a Bahá'í may be encouraged to come to her own conclusions about the application of a law, for herself. Again, this is a form of individual interpretation. In Islam, such individual

juridical reasoning was called deriving (istinbát) the law or ijtihád (struggling to find the law based on a text).

The major school of Shí'í Islam forbade the laity from engaging in ijtihád on any issues beyond the most basic. In the Bahá'í Faith, however, there is wide latitude for individual and collective legal interpretation by non-experts. Bahá'u'lláh said all Bahá'ís must contribute to finding answers to religious questions in the Bahá'í Faith, since in this day all things are bearers, each in its own way, of the divine effulgences.(22)

Even in His own lifetime, Bahá'u'lláh urged lay believers to settle the questions they brought him, concerning the just distribution of certain sorts of property and wealth, through their own consultations.(23)

The daily individual legal interpretation (ijtihád, istinbát.) of ordinary Bahá'ís and of Bahá'í scholars has no doubt provided, and will continue to provide, important insights to those charged with making legal judgments. In addition to such group consultation about the law, Bahá'í jurisconsults and jurists will eventually emerge to write position papers on various issues.

All of these interpretive activities remain in the sphere of individual interpretation, and such an interpretation has no authority save for the individual that decides upon it for herself or himself, or for a group that adopts it informally. Such individual interpretation can exist only in legal areas that have not been clearly defined by Bahá'í institutions and on which they feel uniformity is not necessary. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that "the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice."(24) Note that this statement does not forbid the publication of position papers arguing for a particular conclusion, but simply denies such individual opinions any practical authority.

There are two sorts of official interpretation of Bahá'í legal texts. The first is again the authoritative interpretation (tabyín) of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Their legal interpretations set precedents where it is clear that they had been provided with sufficient information to make an informed decision. Authoritative legal interpretation ended with the passing of Shoghi Effendi and the end of the Guardianship in 1957. The second is the elucidation of statutory texts engaged in by Local and National Spiritual Assemblies and by the Universal House of Justice, which is given force by Bahá'u'lláh's charge to houses of justice of resolving the community's problems and deciding on reward and punishment. The Universal House of Justice is charged with implementing Bahá'í law and with the legislative function of making new canon law, but obviously a certain amount of elucidation of existing law is necessary to both functions. Elucidation is precisely the istinbát. or ijtihád referred to in the quote from 'Abdu'l-Bahá above, and its ultimate practitioner is the Universal House of Justice. Elucidation is the process of deriving the law from existing texts so as

to rule on a particular case. It differs from authorized interpretation of law in having solely to do with the processes of law-making and of implementing

law, since in order to do either one must understand and fix the purport of existing law. The Universal House of Justice's "pronouncements, which are susceptible of amendment or abrogation by the House of Justice itself, serve to supplement and apply the Law of God."(25)

That is, the Universal House of Justice may not only repeal its own legislation but can also repudiate earlier elucidations of a legal text as outmoded.

Aside from elective Bahá'í institutions, official rulings on the law will also be made by individuals or panels appointed for the task. We have already seen that 'Abdu'l-Bahá envisaged the House of Justice occasionally adopting a legal position worked out by an individual Bahá'í jurist. Further, in his own lifetime Shoghi Effendi envisaged the establishment of a Bahá'í court in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries to handle matters of personal status according to Bahá'í law, so that some matters of legal interpretation now in the purview of elected Bahá'í institutions will eventually be devolved by them upon Bahá'í judges.(26) Their legal interpretation will have the official sanction of the institutions, and so will not be merely "individual" interpretation.

Conclusion

Interpretation of scripture in the Bahá'í Faith involves a number of discrete activities, each referred to by a different technical term in Arabic and Persian. Religious texts may be approached by individuals through figurative interpretation or formal exegesis, in the light of the authoritative interpretations put forth by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Legal texts are not to be subjected to figurative or subjective interpretation. Why the difference? I would suggest that whereas narrative, eschatological and other texts might be amenable to subjective interpretation, the imperative mood necessitates literalism. But scope for legal interpretation by individual and community (istinbát., ijtihád) exists. Wider issues affecting the entire community are decided by the legal reasoning of Bahá'í institutions, whether current spiritual assemblies and the Universal House of Justice or a future judiciary appointed for the purpose of ruling on issues in personal status and other disputes.

Bahá'u'lláh Himself refers to interpretive issues twice in The Most Holy Book. In one instance he says that after His passing Bahá'ís should resolve their differences with reference to the revealed Book. In another passage, He instructs them to turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

During the period 1892-1957, Bahá'ís had an authoritative Interpreter to whom they could appeal to resolve difficulties. Since the Guardian's death and the end of the line of Guardians initially envisaged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'ís have been left only with

texts, since there is no longer a living Interpreter (mubayyin). The judicial and legislative functions of the elected Houses of Justice are adequately delineated in the works of the Central Figures so that Bahá'í legal interpretation is not problematic institutionally, though there is increasing need for the development of Bahá'í "principles of jurisprudence" to aid Houses of Justice and Bahá'í canon law judges in interpreting the law. But theological or religious interpretation is now entirely open, constrained only by the texts left by Bahá'u'lláh and His two successors.

The picture I derive from what has gone before is that the Holy Figures of the Bahá'í Faith favoured a mix of all three hermeneutical approaches, discussed at the beginning of this article, associated with Gadamer, Dilthey, and Wittgenstein. Like Gadamer, Bahá'u'lláh and His successors believed that scriptural verses had truth-content that transcended the mere circumstances of their revelation or the immediate intentions of their authors. This truth-content can be derived from individual interpretation and techniques such as figurative interpretation (ta'wíl). Formal exegesis (tafsír) has a bias toward surface meaning, and in Islamic tradition often involves a focus on context (when and under what circumstances was a verse revealed?), intentionality (what did God mean?), and the hermeneutic circle (how can Qur'anic verses and oral reports [adíth] of the Prophet shed light on one another?). This approach, also authorised by Bahá'u'lláh, comes close to Dilthey's conception of modern hermeneutics. Contemporary Bahá'í academics, of course, are forthrightly employing the techniques of modernist hermeneutics, paying attention to historical context and textual development in a much more rigorous manner than did classical Muslim exegetes. Formal exegesis must incorporate not only empirical and rationalist methods, but also esoteric or figurative ones. Esoteric interpretation (ta'wíl) itself is polyvalent, containing multiple meanings and accommodating individual experiences and local knowledge traditions. All these approaches must co-exist, according to Bahá'u'lláh. This simultaneous affirmation of a number of different perspectives and interpretive strategies, some of them subjective or idiosyncratic, recalls Wittgenstein's model of numerous language-games growing out of diverse interpretive communities, each an intellectual life-form, and each meaningful in its own right. Indeed, it seems that something very like a Wittgensteinian theology is posited in Bahá'í texts as an organising principle for the other approaches.

Figure 1: Some types of Bahá'í Scripture Interpretation

Individual
Individual
Authorised Interpreter
Religious Texts

ta'wil (subjective hermeneutics)
tafsír (formal scripture commentary)
tabyín (authoritative interpretation)

Legal Texts

istinbát. or ijtihád (individual legal interpretation for private or limited purposes)

1. tabyín authoritative interpretation by Holy Figures)
2. istinbát (elucidation by the Universal House of Justice)

End Notes

See Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), esp. chapter 1; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); for the debate with Habermas see Martin Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate," in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982) 86-110.

For Wittgenstein and interpretation see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Susan B. Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory: Beyond Postmodernism and toward Descriptive Investigations* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985). For postmodernism two key texts are Paul Rabinow, *Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) and Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); see also articles in LaCapra and Kaplan, cited above.

Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 72-73, 138-139.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) 24 ff.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqtidárát va Chand Law-i Dígar* (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.) 283-84.

For Bahá'u'lláh's urging of tolerance of diverse theologies see K. Fananapazir, "A Tablet . . . to Jamál-i Burújirdí," *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 5 (Jan. 1991): 4-12; for his quotation of the saying about each verse having seventy-two meanings, see Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 255-256.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) para. 37.

See J. Cole, "Bahá'u'lláh's Commentary on the Surah of the Sun," *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 4 (April 1990): 4-27

E.g. 'Abdu'l-amíd Ishráq-Khávarí, *Qámús-i Íqán*, 4 vols. (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972).

Todd Lawson, "The Qur'án Commentary of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shírazí, the Báb." 2 vols. McGill University, Ph.D. dissertation, 1987; Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret* (Los Angeles: Kalimat, 1995); Adib Taherzadeh, *Revelation of*

Bahá'u'lláh, 4 vols. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1976-1987); numerous articles by Stephen Lambden in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*.

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K173.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) 3, 37.

'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971) 337.

. Shoghi Effendi, letter of 6 April 1928, in Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 423.

Universal House of Justice, Wellspring of Guidance (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 88.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Most Holy Book*, para. 174.

'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently referred to himself as the Interpreter or Expounder (mubayyin) of Bahá'u'lláh's revealed Scripture; see, for instance, Fáiil Mazandarání, *Amr va Khalq*, 4 vols. in 2 (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1971-72), 4:288; this is a function he devolves upon the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, in his *Will and Testament: 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Alváh-i Vasáyá* (Karachi: Sterling Garden Road Press, 1960), p. 11; the Universal House of Justice has the authority to legislate but not to interpret authoritatively, as is clear from Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 149-150.

Shoghi Effendi, "Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh," in *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 97-139.

One such discrepancy concerns the issue of the identity of the son that Abraham almost sacrificed. The Bible and Judeo-Christian tradition name that son as Isaac. The Qur'án is silent on the name. Early Muslim tradition, however, was split, with some sayings of the Prophet being circulated that spoke of Isaac, while others spoke of Ishmael as the near-sacrifice. The majority opinion among Muslims eventually settled upon Ishmael. Bahá'u'lláh uses this diction. When asked about this contradiction with the Bible, 'Abdu'l-Bahá acknowledges that early Islamic tradition admitted both possibilities, but that at that point the people of the East tended to speak of Ishmael. He says that the name is unimportant, and either could be used, since it is the symbol of the sacrifice that is key ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátib*, volume 2 [Cairo: Matba'ah Kurdistan al-'Ilmiyyah, 1912] 328-30). Shoghi Effendi's secretary, on the other hand, wrote on his behalf that both Bahá'u'lláh and the Qur'án specified Ishmael and that Bahá'ís were bound to employ this diction (Helen Hornby, ed., *Lights of Guidance* [New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983] 370). The Qur'án, however, does not identify the son one way or the other, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá explicitly allowed Bahá'ís to use either son's name to refer to the Sacrifice.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Most Holy Book* para. 105.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqtidárát* 279; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Abdu'l-Hamíd

Ishráq-Khávárí, ed., *Má'idih-i Ásmání*, 9 volumes and index (Tehran:

Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973) 9:18.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqtidárát* 100.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Áthár-i Qalam-i A'lá*, 7 volumes (Bombay and Tehran: 1892-1978) 7:288.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:355-56. Original reference in 'Abdu'l-amíd Ishráq-Khávarí, ed., *Rahíq-i Makhtúm*, 2 vols. (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 103 B.E.) 1: 203-204.

The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance* 52 (I am grateful to Brent Poirier for this citation). For the legal foundations of the Universal House of Justice's right to undertake elucidation, see Bahá'u'lláh, "Ishráqát 8," *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1988) 128-129; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Compilation of Compilations*, 1:355-56; and "The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice," in *The Bahá'í World*, Volume 17 (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1981) 286.

Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972) 139; cf. Shoghi Effendi, *Dawn of a New Day* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) 170.

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