

Bahá'u'lláh and Mystics

There is much evidence that Bahá'u'lláh was sympathetic to and had close relations with many Muslim mystics during His lifetime. The clearest evidence for this comes from the Baghdad period. When Bahá'u'lláh left Baghdad because of disunity among the Bábís, He took up the lifestyle of a wandering dervish among the Sulaymaniyyah mountains. He soon became regarded as a Sufi shaykh and was invited by the head of the Khalidiyyah (Naqshbandíyyah Order) in the Kurdish town of Sulaymaniyyah to stay in their takiyyah (retreat). While there, Bahá'u'lláh expounded on the great mystical text, the Futúhát M akkiyyah of Ibn al- 'Arabí. He also composed a poem, the Qasídah-yi Warqá'íyyah (Ode of the Dove), in the style of the Tá'íyyah, a famous poem of the Sufi master, Ibn Fárid. Although the Bábís of Baghdad managed to persuade Bahá'u'lláh to return there, He continued His ties with the Kurdish Sufis, who visited him from time to time in Baghdad. Since the time of His years in Baghdad He had been in touch with the Qádiriyyah Order as well as the Naqshbandíyyah. He wrote the Four Valleys for a Kurdish Sufi leader whom He had met in Sulaymáníyyih, Shaykh 'Abdu'r-Rahmán Tálabání of Kirkúk, the head of the prominent Kurdish Tálabání family and leader (shaykh) of the Qádirí Sufi order in Kurdistan. Bahá'u'lláh also wrote the Seven Valleys for Shaykh Muhiyu'd-Dín, a Sufi of the Qádirí order, who was to succeed his father as a Sufi shaykh in Gilzarda. In these texts, Bahá'u'lláh showed Himself to be perfectly at home with Sufi terminology and concepts. During the rest of Bahá'u'lláh's sojourns, He remained in touch with Sufi initiates and shaykhs. Hájí Mírzá Ridá Qulí Safá, a well-known Sufi shaykh of the Ni'matu'lláhí order, visited him in Istanbul; Hájí Muhammad 'Alí Pírzádi, a celebrated Sufi, boarded Bahá'u'lláh's ship at Alexandria to pay his respects; and Hájí Muhammad 'Alí Sayyah visited Bahá'u'lláh in 'Akká. Many Ottoman officials were inclined to Sufism and several of these came to regard Bahá'u'lláh very highly on account of the spirituality they observed in him. Among these was Sulayman Páshá, a Sufi of the Qádiriyyah Order who was governor of Edirne while Bahá'u'lláh was there. Bahá'u'lláh also instructed 'Abdu'l-Bahá to respond to a request from Safvet Páshá for a commentary on an Islamic Tradition much favoured by Sufis ("I was a Hidden Treasure . . ."). Among those who became Bahá'ís during the time of Bahá'u'lláh, there

were many who were either Sufis
or were inclined towards Sufism. Among these was the famous calligrapher
Mírzá Muhammad Husayn
Mishkín-Qalam, a Sufi of the Ni‘matulláhi order; Sulaymán Khán, later
known as Jamál Effendi; and Ahmad

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Yazdí, to whom the Arabic Tablet of Ahmad was addressed; and several of
several of the companions of
Bahá’u’lláh in His journeys, including Darvish Sidq ‘Alí, Mírzá
Muhammad- ‘Alí Isfahání, and Hájí
Muhammad Khán Balúch. Many other prominent disciples of Bahá’u’lláh
either showed interest in Sufism or
wore the garb of dervishes for a time. These include Mullá Muhammad Zarandí
Nabil-i-A‘zam and Mullá
Muhammad Qá‘iní Nabil-i-Akbar.
There were also a number of conversions among Iranian Sufi dervishes, who, even
after conversion, con-
tinued as wandering dervishes. Hájí Qalandar of Hamadán, upon becoming a
Bahá’í took to the road and lived
the life of a wandering dervish, meeting with and converting other dervishes.
He visited ‘Akká on several
occasions, once in the company of another Bahá’í dervish Sádiq-‘Alí
Qazvíní (Mazandarání n.d., 6:711-12).
Hájí ‘Abdu’l-Karím of Qazvín, a twenty-year-old man from a wealthy
family, met Hájí Qalandar and was con-
verted both to the Bahá’í Faith and the dervish way of life. Leaving behind
all his property, he took the Sufi
name of ‘Árif- ‘Alí and began to travel. After a time, a certain
Ismá‘íl joined him as student, taking the Sufi
name Hájí Tayfúr. These two travelled through the Ottoman domains eventually
reaching ‘Akká, where
Bahá’u’lláh gave Hájí ‘Abdu’l-Karím the name of Hájí Mu’nis
(Mazandarání n.d., 6:554-5). In Baghdad, the
two travellers met and converted Hájí Tavangar, another dervish from Qazvín,
and four of his companions
(Mazandarání n.d., 6:555-6). In this way, the Bahá’í Faith gradually
spread among the dervishes. On one occa-
sion, a group of six Bahá’í dervishes appeared in ‘Akká to visit
Bahá’u’lláh.
It would appear that Bahá’u’lláh looked to Sufism and mysticism as a way
of attracting Sunnis to the Bahá’í
Faith, since Sunnis were usually hostile to anything that emerged from Iran and
which they therefore consid-
ered tainted with Shi‘ism. This process started in Baghdad where
Bahá’u’lláh produced several mystical works
in a style familiar to Sufis. But it was from ‘Akká that Bahá’u’lláh

appears to have organised and directed a campaign to spread the Bahá'í Faith among Arab, Turkish and Indian Sunnis through Bahá'í mystics, who would travel through these lands in the garb of dervishes, speaking to the people and hoping to guide a few to the Bahá'í Faith. They would, of course, use Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys and Four Valleys as well as His mystical poetry for this. Among those who appear to have been specifically instructed by Bahá'u'lláh to carry out this campaign were Hájí Qalandar, who after visiting Bahá'u'lláh travelled through Syria, Iraq, and Anatolia (Mazandarání n.d., 6:711-12); Jamál Effendi, who was instructed by Bahá'u'lláh to travel in the garb of a Sufi dervish throughout the Ottoman domains and teach the Bahá'í Faith (1871-5; Samandar, Tarikh, 213 and Momen 1999-2000, 50) and who was later instructed to continue in the same way throughout India and south-east and central Asia (Momen 1999-2000); Hájí Eliyáhu who, after visiting Bahá'u'lláh in 'Akká, travelled throughout the Sunni world in dervish dress (Mazandarání n.d., 6:674); and Sayyid Háshim of Káshán, who on Bahá'u'lláh's instructions spent seven years wandering through Iraq, Syria and the Arabian peninsula dressed as a dervish (Vahid-Tehrani n.d., 1-2). None of these individuals appears to have had any great success, however, except for Jamál Effendi's efforts in India and Burma. Later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appears to have abandoned this plan in favour of using Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpáygání to approach the more orthodox Sunni Muslims at the Azhár University in Cairo.

The Social Organisation of Mystical Orders

Insofar as we can discern similarities in the social organisation of the mysticism in the various religions of the world, these would consist of:

1. A hierarchical structure with a leader who is regarded as being farthest along the spiritual path and who is thought capable of guiding others along that path. One of the main features of mysticism in the religions of the world is the fact that they usually result in some form of hierarchical organisation. In Theravada and most forms of Mahayana Buddhism, the spiritual path can only be successfully trod in a monastery under the guidance and authority of an abbot or senior monk. In many forms of Hinduism, true mysticism only occurs under the tutelage of a guru. Absolute obedience of His commands is required. In Christianity, the traditional path for

mystics was to join one of the more mystical monastic orders, such as the Franciscans and the Carmelites . These orders often stressed discipline and obedience to the hierarchy of the order. Islamic mysticism, Sufism, is organised into orders, each of which has a shaykh (pír, murshid) or leader. The fact that progress along the mystical path can only be attained under the authority and guidance of a shaykh is emphasised by such sayings as “he who has no shaykh has the Devil as his shaykh.”

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One of the aspects of the master-initiate relationship that is thus set up is that of confession, laying oneself emotionally and psychologically bare before the master. This practice forms an important part of Christian mystical and monastic orders, but is also to be found in Sufi orders. Another aspect is the complete submission and obedience shown by the initiate towards the master. It was not unusual, for example, for the initiate to prostrate themselves before the master. Rules about how initiates are to behave, especially towards the master are part of Christian, Sufi and Buddhist orders. A typical text explaining the relationship of master to initiate is the following description of Sufism: This relationship draws the novice from the turmoil of the world into the refuge provided by the master's spiritual presence and protection. This result demands, however, that two conditions be fulfilled: (1) confession and (2) compliance with the master's guidance. (Ajmal 1987: 295-6)

2. The insistence that it is only by personal, oral transmission of the teaching and experience of the community that one can really make progress along the spiritual path—it is not something that can just be learned from books. This principle is held by mystics and mystical orders from Buddhism and Hinduism through Islam and Christianity. Thus for example, Honen, the Japanese Buddhist Master and founder of the Jodo school of Buddhism, said: A man who reads about the doctrines of the Jodo without receiving oral instruction will miss the thing really necessary to the attainment of Ojo (enlightenment). (Shunjo 394)

All mystical orders are to some extent gnostic—they hold to a secret or knowledge or wisdom which is only transmitted through their order. Indeed, even within the order, there is sometimes an elite inner circle that has full access to this esoteric knowledge while the outer circle merely benefits and obtains a grace and blessing

through being associated with the inner circle. There is thus usually a distinct elitism associated with these mystical orders. This state of affairs is described thus by Frithjof Schuon: [A]lthough esotericism is reserved, by definition and because of its very nature, for an intellectual elite necessarily restricted in numbers, one cannot help observing that initiatory organizations have at all times included in their ranks a relatively large number of members . . . this leads to a distinction, within the brotherhoods between inner and outer circles, the members of the latter being scarcely aware of the real nature of the organization to which they belong . . . (Schuon 1984: 33-4) These mystical orders usually relate this secret or esoteric knowledge to the founder of their religion, sometimes saying that it is a secret teaching that the founder transmitted to those who were ready to hear it or else that the founder transmitted in a dream or vision.

3. An inclination towards monasticism or asceticism. Insofar as these mystical orders perceive the world and its distractions to be a hindrance to their quest, these groups try to isolate themselves from the world. In the monastic setting there are often elaborate rules of behaviour for initiates to follow, commonly involving periods of isolation, a reduction or absence of speech, sexual abstinence and a general reduction in ordinary human interactions. Even in Islam, where monasticism is prohibited, the Sufi orders developed retreats (khanegahs, tekkes, or zawiyas), which shared many similarities with monasteries.

4. Practices that lead to altered states of consciousness. The commonest form of this is the repeated rhythmic chanting of a formula (mantra [Skt.], dhikr [Ar.], or hesychasm [Gr.]), usually accompanied by rhythmic breathing leading to hyperventilation and resulting in ecstatic and trance experiences. In fact these ecstatic and trance states result in altered states of consciousness which are often interpreted by those experiencing them as become one with the universe. Thus they reinforce the monistic view of reality to which these mystical orders subscribe.

5. Ethics, Law and Unity. There are a number of other features which are not typical of mystical orders but which did occur historically in Islam and which we will note here because they were of particular concern to Bahá'u'lláh. In Islamic history we can see a development in mysticism. In the earliest phase, mystics were just pious individuals, such as Hasan al-Basrí and Rabí'a (both eighth century C.E.) with a desire for direct com-

munion with and experience of the Divine. Although these individuals may have had a circle of students to whom they gave religious instruction, they did not attempt to set up a religious community or order. Later, in the Twelfth through Thirteenth Centuries, Islamic mysticism became more formal with the setting up of the

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spiritual lineages of the great Sufi orders, such as the Qádiriyyah and the Rifá'iyah. Although ideally, each successive leader of the order was chosen by the previous leader on the basis of their high spiritual station and their ability to guide others, in practice, the leadership of most Sufi orders became hereditary. By the Fifteenth Century, these Sufi orders had begun to establish formal practices such as repetitive chanting, rhythmic breathing, song and dance. Increasingly the focus was away from individual spiritual development and towards group practices (which often led to altered levels of consciousness and the ecstatic experiences associated with such states), the veneration of saints and shrines, and the working of miracles and cures—activities that no doubt increased the popularity of these orders, but were of little relevance to the true mystic quest. In other words, spiritual depth had been sacrificed for show, effect and sentiment. In several religions, and especially in Islam, there has also been a tendency for some of those pursuing the mystical path to degenerate morally. Thinking that they have achieved a higher plane through spiritual exercises and discipline, they have considered themselves above the religious law and sometimes sunk into morally reprehensible behaviour.

The mystical thread in the development of religions has always been in tension with other threads, such as the trend towards ritualism and legalism. In the religions of the West, those tending towards legalism have usually attacked those who follow the mystic path. Thus another problem of the mystic path has been the propensity to cause divisions.

When Bahá'u'lláh came to analyse and give His formulation of the spiritual problems of humanity, He gave some degree of attention to what was by then the ancient question of how to organise a community that sets out to promote spiritual development. In His analysis, He pointed out the weaknesses of the existing systematisations of the mystic path in the world's religions.

Bahá'u'lláh's critique of existing mystical pathways

In His writings, Bahá'u'lláh critiques all five of the characteristic features of mystical order that are enumerated above. As He surveys the various religious hierarchies and organizational frameworks that existed in His day, He found none of them satisfactory for His purpose of creating a mystical religious community.

1. Leadership and a hierarchical structure. Bahá'u'lláh's criticism of all forms of religious leadership can be found in many places in His works. His assessment of them is: Leaders of religion, in every age, have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp. Some for the lust of leadership, others through want of knowledge and understanding, have been the cause of the deprivation of the people. By their sanction and authority, every Prophet of God hath drunk from the chalice of sacrifice, and winged His flight unto the heights of glory. . . . Content with a transitory dominion, they have deprived themselves of an everlasting sovereignty. (Bahá'u'lláh 1989:15-16)

Although Bahá'u'lláh allows that in past ages, when the majority of people were illiterate and there were no social support systems in society, religious leaders and religious professionals may have been necessary, He states that that stage in human history is now past. With the increasing ability of all human beings to obtain an education and read the scriptures for themselves, the balance has now shifted so that the negative aspects of their role outweigh the positive.

Bahá'u'lláh also comments on some specific practices that are part of the master-initiate relationship. Apart from abolishing the religious leadership of the mystical master and the obedience due to him, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits the confessing by one individual of his/her sins before any individual or even in a group setting: Moreover such confession before people results in one's humiliation and abasement, and God—exalted be His glory—wisheth not the humiliation of His servants. (Bahá'u'lláh 1978, 24)

2. Oral Transmission and Gnostic Knowledge. With regard to oral transmission of scripture and knowledge, which is considered of primary importance in most mystical traditions, Bahá'u'lláh deals with this as an aspect of His criticism of religious leadership as a whole. The insistence on oral transmission is often a pretext for elevating and strengthening the position of the leader of a mystical order. But

the tradition of oral transmission and master-initiate relationships is also condemned by Bahá'u'lláh because it leads to taqlíd, the blind imita-

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tion and following of the master, and thus to spiritual stagnation. It negates that spirit of search and investigation which is essential on the mystic path: "O My Brother, journey upon these planes in the spirit of search, not in blind imitation" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 24). He also attributed the corruption of Islam to its attribution of binding authority to the orally transmitted reports of the sayings of Muhammad (Shoghi Effendi in Hornby 1988, 439, no. 1435).

With regard to the gnostic knowledge implicit in most mystical orders, Bahá'u'lláh states that in this day all the spiritual knowledge and guidance that is necessary for the mystic quest is freely and openly available to all. All claims to a secret spiritual knowledge that is above what ordinary people can understand are to be treated with great suspicion.

And among the people is he who layeth claim to inner knowledge, and still deeper knowledge concealed within this knowledge. Say: Thou speakest false! By God! What thou dost possess is naught but husks which We have left to thee as bones are left to dogs. (1992, 36)

Even more strongly condemned are those who claim that certain specific abstruse knowledge is necessary for spiritual understanding. Bahá'u'lláh condemned, for example Karím Khán Kirmání, the Shaykhí leader who taught mystical philosophy to his circle of disciples. He states that he had perused Kirmání's book *Irshádu'l-Awwám* (*Guidance to the Ignorant*) and "From this title We perceived the odour of conceit and vain-glory, inasmuch as he hath imagined himself a learned man and regarded the rest of the people ignorant" (1989, 185). More specifically, Bahá'u'lláh condemns Kirmání for claiming that some twenty obscure and abstruse branches of learning were necessary in order to understand Muhammad's *Mi'ráj*, the night-ascent to heaven, one of the key events in the life of Muhammad, that has always been understood by mystics in Islam to be a symbol of the mystic's ascent towards God.

We noticed that he had enumerated some twenty or more sciences, the knowledge of which he considered to be essential for the comprehension of the mystery of the "Mi'ráj." We gathered from his statements that

unless a man be deeply versed in them all, he can never attain to a proper understanding of this transcendent and exalted theme. Among the specified sciences were the science of metaphysical abstractions, of alchemy, and natural magic. Such vain and discarded learnings, this man hath regarded as the pre-requisites of the understanding of the sacred and abiding mysteries of divine Knowledge . . .

Gracious God! Such is the measure of his understanding . . . how clear and evident it is to every discerning heart that this so-called learning is and hath ever been, rejected by Him Who is the one true God. How can the knowledge of these sciences, which are so contemptible in the eyes of the truly learned, be regarded as essential to the apprehension of the mysteries of the “Mi‘rāj,” whilst the Lord of the “Mi‘rāj” Himself was never burdened with a single letter of these limited and obscure learnings, and never defiled His radiant heart with any of these fanciful illusions? . . . By the righteousness of God! Whoso desireth to fathom the mystery of this “Mi‘rāj,” and craveth a drop from this ocean, if the mirror of his heart be already obscured by the dust of these learnings, he must needs cleanse and purify it ere the light of this mystery can be reflected therein. (1989, 186-7)

Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes in His works that true spiritual knowledge is not dependent on book learning or instruction in abstruse and esoteric matters. It is purely dependent on one's spiritual qualities and capacities: Heed not the idle contention of those who maintain that the Book and verses thereof can never be a testimony unto the common people, inasmuch as they neither grasp their meaning nor appreciate their value.

And yet, the unfailing testimony of God to both the East and the West is none other than the Qur'án. Were it beyond the comprehension of men, how could it have been declared as a universal testimony unto all people? . . .

Such contention is utterly fallacious and inadmissible. It is actuated solely by arrogance and pride. Its motive is to lead the people astray from the Ridván of divine good-pleasure and to tighten the reins of their authority over the people. And yet, in the sight of God, these common people are infinitely superior and exalted above their religious leaders who have turned away from the one true God. The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in

no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit. (1989, 210-11)

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3. Monasticism or asceticism. Bahá'u'lláh states that monasticism and withdrawal from the world is no longer an acceptable means for individuals to try to achieve spiritual progress. He instructs monks and others who seclude themselves to go out into the world and occupy themselves with what will benefit humanity:

Say: O concourse of monks! Seclude not yourselves in your churches and cloisters. Come ye out of them by My leave, and busy, then, yourselves with what will profit you and others. Thus commandeth you He Who is the Lord of the Day of Reckoning. Seclude yourselves in the stronghold of My love. This, truly, is the seclusion that befitteth you, could ye but know it. He that secludeth himself in his house is indeed as one dead. It behooveth man to show forth that which will benefit mankind. He that bringeth forth no fruit is fit for the fire. (1988, 49)

Bahá'u'lláh also admonishes monks and spiritual ascetics that the concept of celibacy as an assistance to spiritual progress is erroneous. In Christianity, for example, Bahá'u'lláh states that it was born out of a misguided idea that all sexual intercourse is evil and out of a ill-conceived desire to emulate Christ's celibacy.

Bahá'u'lláh states that it is lechery that is forbidden, not legitimate marital relations, and that the reason for Christ's celibacy was not intended to indicate that this was a desirable state but rather was born out of necessity. Addressing monks in general, He states: Enter ye into wedlock, that after you another may arise in your stead. We, verily, have forbidden you lechery, and not that which is conducive to fidelity. . . . He that married not (Jesus Christ) could find no place wherein to abide, nor where to lay His head, by reason of what the hands of the treacherous had wrought.

His holiness consisted not in the things ye have believed and imagined, but rather in the things which belong unto Us. (1988, 49-50)

Bahá'u'lláh condemns asceticism and the severe practices of self-denial and self-punishment that often accompany this. He implies that these actions are often only done so as to attract the adulation of the masses:

How many a man hath secluded himself in the climes of India, denied himself the things that God hath decreed as lawful, imposed upon himself austerities and mortifications, and hath not been remembered by God, the Revealer of Verses. Make not your deeds as snares wherewith to entrap the object of your aspiration. (1992, 36)

4. Practices that lead to altered states of consciousness. Among the laws given by Bahá'u'lláh is one that commands the chanting of the phrase "Alláhu Abha" 95 times daily. There is some question as to whether this can be considered the same as Sufi dhikr or a mantra. The fact that one must count the number of times that one is saying the formula is somewhat against that loss of consciousness of one's surroundings that usually accompanies trance and ecstasy states associated with reciting dhikrs and mantras.

What we can say is that although Bahá'u'lláh made the spiritual development of the individual a central concern of His religion, He did not raise any of the practices leading to altered states of consciousness to the level of a law. Thus He evidently did not think these practices were essential for spiritual development. Moreover,

Bahá'u'lláh warns against excessive recitation to the point that causes weariness and dejection:

Pride not yourselves on much reading of the verses or on a multitude of pious acts by night and day; for were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. Read ye the sacred verses in such measure that ye be not overcome by languor and despondency. Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them, so that they may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the Dawning-place of His manifest signs; this will draw you nearer to God, did ye but comprehend. (1992, 149)

Another mystical activity which some traditions recommend is the practice of visualization. In Mahayana

Buddhism, for example, one of the spiritual practices that is recommended is that of visualising the Western

Paradise (Sukhavati) of Amitabha. This visualisation is achieved under the instruction of a master. 'Abdu'l-

Bahá speaks of a similar process of visualising but rather than visualising a heavenly place, the process that

He refers to is the intellectual visualising, with the inner eye, of a

spiritual truth. Moreover, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not imply that a master is required for this process to occur: Day and night you must strive that you may attain to the significances of the heavenly Kingdom, perceive

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the signs of Divinity, acquire certainty of knowledge and realize that this world has a Creator, a Vivifier, a Provider, an Architect—knowing this through proofs and evidences and not through susceptibilities, nay, rather, through decisive arguments and real vision—that is to say, visualizing it as clearly as the outer eye beholds the sun. In this way may you behold the presence of God and attain to the knowledge of the holy, divine Manifestations. (1982, 227)

5. Ethics, Law and Unity. Bahá’u’lláh was strongly critical in several places in His writings of certain developments in Sufism. In the Seven Valleys, He specifically refutes those Sufis who have asserted that once a mystic has attained a certain level or stage on the mystic path, then religious laws, which are intended for the uninitiated masses, are no longer incumbent upon them:

In all these journeys the traveller must stray not the breadth of a hair from the “Law,” for this is indeed the secret of the “Path” and the fruit of the Tree of “Truth” ; and in all these stages he must cling to the robe of obedience to the commandments, and hold fast to the cord of shunning all forbidden things, that he may be nourished from the cup of the Law and informed of the mysteries of Truth. (1991, 39-40)

In general, in Bahá’u’lláh’s time, the behaviour and morals of some Sufis had sunk to a low point. Some were intoxicated and unruly; others were unprincipled charlatans who performed sleights of hand and trickery

to fool the uneducated masses into thinking that they had super-natural powers . After a passage in which

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that Bahá’u’lláh ordained a special night for the mystics and dervishes, He goes on to correct any possible misunderstanding as to who is meant:

He went on to say that “dervish” does not denote those persons who wander about, spending their nights and days in fighting and folly; rather, He said, the term designates those who are completely severed from all but God, who cleave to His laws, are firm in His Faith, loyal to His Covenant, and constant in worship.

It is not a name for those who, as the Persians say, tramp about like vagrants, are confused, unsettled in

mind, a burden to others, and of all mankind the most coarse and rude. (1971, 38)

In addition, Bahá'u'lláh condemns some mystics for allowing themselves to be fed and supported by the generality of the people, while they seclude themselves and do nothing that contributes to the general good.

Among them are mystics who bear allegiance to the Faith of Islam, some of whom indulge in that which

leadeth to idleness and seclusion. I swear by God! It lowereth man's station and maketh him swell with

pride. Man must bring forth fruit. One who yieldeth no fruit is, in the words of the Spirit [Christ], like unto

a fruitless tree, and a fruitless tree is fit but for the fire. (1978, 60)

Bahá'u'lláh was also critical of any movement that created a split or disunity in a religion. Mystics often

created such disunity by being at odds with the majority of their fellow-believers, although it must be admit-

ted that it has usually been the latter and their leaders that have initiated the conflict and have persecuted the

mystics. In the Tablet of Unity, Bahá'u'lláh condemns in particular the creation of separate sects based on dif-

ferent rituals and public acts of worship. He refers in particular to different ways of saying the ritual obligato-

ry prayer and to the Sufi practice of dancing. He laments the fact that Islam has become weakened because it

has become divided into numerous religious communities, each with their own public rituals and practices.

Bahá'u'lláh considers that the Sufi orders have played a major role in this process of dividing and weakening

Islam. In the following provisional translation of a passage from the Tablet of Unity, Bahá'u'lláh specifically

refers to a number of Sufi orders as examples of this process:

The Holy Law (Sharí'ah) of the Messenger of God may be likened to an ocean from which innumerable

gulfs branch out. And this is the cause of the weakness of the Sharí'ah of God among the peoples. Until

now no-one, not kings nor subjects nor the indigent have understood the reason for this, nor have they

appreciated how to regain that power that has vanished and the learning that has fallen away. Thus one gulf

is Shí'a, one gulf is Sunni, one Shaykhí, another Sháh Ni'matulláhí, one Naqshbandí, another Malámatí,

one Jalálí, another Rifá'í, and yet another Khárábátí. Thus are multiplied the innumerable pathways to hell.

Thus do the stones weep and the Pen of the All-High laments. Seest thou what has befallen a Sharí'ah

whose light illumined the world and whose fire, that is to say the fire of its

love, was the guide of its peoples. Well is it with those who ponder upon these matters and investigate them and are fair in their judgement. Thus did this difference in public rituals become the cause of the shaking of the foundations of the Cause of God (Bahá'u'lláh unpublished)

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Bahá'u'lláh's Formula for a Mystic Community

One of the most important things that Bahá'u'lláh did was to make it clear that the quest for personal spiritual development (the mystical quest) is the central concern of religion. This is something that has not always been clear in other religions. In the majority orthodox interpretation of Judaism and both Sunni and Shí'í Islam, for example, the central concern of the religion is the following of a Holy Law, the correct performance of rituals and the correct pattern of life. Bahá'u'lláh annuls most of the provisions of the Holy Law, saying in effect that such rigid frameworks were necessary in the childhood of humanity but now that humanity has reached maturity, decisions on the pattern of one's life should be left to the ethical judgement and sense of dignity and moderation of the individual. Instead, He refocuses the energies of the followers of His Religion on the spiritual development of the individual. From now on, the mystic quest is to be everyone's concern. Using the term that in Sufism signifies the mystical union of the lover and the Beloved (wisál), Bahá'u'lláh calls this day, "the Day whereon the Finger of majesty and power hath opened the seal of the Wine of Reunion (wisál), and called all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth." (1983, 28-29)

Thus while the mystical quest is a religious interest of a minority in other religions (the members of Sufi orders, the ascetics in Hinduism, the monks in Christianity and Judaism, etc.), in the Bahá'í Faith, it becomes a central concern of the whole community. While in other religions, separate communities need to be set up in order to cater for the minority who wish to pursue the mystical quest (Sufi orders, Christian and Buddhist monastic communities), in the Bahá'í Faith, the whole community is engaged in the mystical quest and thus the Bahá'í community itself is the mystic community. The Bahá'í administrative order thus becomes the organization of a mystic community.

1. Leadership and a hierarchical structure. In the religious community that He is creating, Bahá'u'lláh does

not want individuals to claim authority. He does not want any Bahá'í to see himself or herself as being of a higher rank than other Bahá'ís. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes this when He states that, despite His position of being the leader of the community and the Centre of the Covenant, He wishes His rank to be merely that of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the "servant" [lit. "s lave"] of Bahá'u'lláh; Shoghi Effendi 1991, 139). Shoghi Effendi similarly refused all attempts by Bahá'ís to elevate his position and he signed his English letters to Bahá'ís "your true brother." Bahá'u'lláh treats of this theme in the Tablet of Unity, of which the following is a provisional translation of the relevant part:

Another type is the unity of rank or station. This results in the rising up of the Cause and its elevation among the peoples. But if ranking and preference of one over another comes into its midst, the world falls into ruin and desolation may be witnessed. Those souls who have drunk from the sea of the utterance of the All-Merciful and are turning towards the All-High Horizon should see themselves as being of one rank and one station. Should this injunction be firmly established and be realised through the power and might of God, the world would be seen as the Abhá paradise. Verily human beings are exalted, as can be found in every Divine scripture; but to consider oneself as more learned, more favoured, more accomplished, more righteous or more exalted is a mighty error and sin. Well is it with those souls who are adorned with the ornament of this unity and are accepted before God. Look at the 'ulamá of Iran. If they had not considered themselves the most exalted and most accomplished of all beings, they would not have caused those wretched followers of theirs to curse and blaspheme against the Desire of the Worlds. All humanity is dismayed, nay the entire world is bewildered, at these false and neglectful souls. The fire of pride and vainglory has burnt them all, but they are not aware of it and do not understand. They have not drunk a drop of the ocean of knowledge and understanding. Woe unto them and unto what their tongues have uttered and unto what their hands have wrought on the day of retribution and on this day when the people have arisen for the Lord of the Worlds. (Bahá'u'lláh, unpublished)

Having established this principle, Bahá'u'lláh was then left with the question that, if the Bahá'ís were to be a mystic community and if there was to be no religious leaders in the

community, what then was going to replace the role of the spiritual guide or master to that mystic community? What was going to replace the Sufi shaykh or murshid, the guru, the abbot or senior monk of the monastery? There are several ways in which the role of the spiritual guide or master is replaced in the Bahá'í community. First, Bahá'u'lláh instructs every Bahá'í to read and meditate upon a passage of the Bahá'í scriptures

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every day: "Peruse ye every day the verses revealed by God. Blessed is the man who reciteth them and reflecteth upon them" (Bahá'u'lláh in Compilation 1991, 1:188, no. 363). Through this process, spiritual secrets will be revealed to the mystic: "Meditate profoundly, that the secret of things unseen may be revealed unto you, that you may inhale the sweetness of a spiritual and imperishable fragrance" (Bahá'u'lláh 1989, 8).

This process will in itself lead to progress along the mystic path: They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful in the most melodious of tones will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty of earth and heaven can never be compared. From them they will inhale the divine fragrance of My worlds—worlds which today none can discern save those who have been endowed with vision through this sublime, this beautiful Revelation. Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion. Blessed be those who hearken. (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, 116)

There are, in the Bahá'í scriptures, numerous prayers, supplications and meditations from Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá which will assist in this process of spiritual enlightenment and progress.

Turn to God, supplicate humbly at His threshold, seeking assistance and confirmation, that God may rend asunder the veils that obscure your vision. Then will your eyes be filled with illumination, face to face you will behold the reality of God and your heart become completely purified from the dross of ignorance, reflecting the glories and bounties of the Kingdom. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 293)

Beyond this, the Bahá'í teachings also have provision for the obtaining of spiritual guidance through tapping the spiritual wisdom of the community. The process of consultation is applied to all aspects of Bahá'í community life. It is applied in the administrative affairs of the community,

but Bahá'ís are also encouraged to gather together, read the Bahá'í scriptures and consult about the meaning and spiritual significance of these. Bahá'u'lláh states that this process leads to “awareness” and “awakening” (in Compilation 1991, 1:93, no. 170). Bahá'u'lláh calls consultation “the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way and the bes tower of true understanding” (Bahá'u'lláh 1978, 168). There is a great deal in the Bahá'í writings about the way in which consultation should occur (see below), but if it is carried out in this way, then Bahá'ís believe that it is superior to the master-initiate relationship as a source of spiritual guidance because it taps the collective wisdom of the group and, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “the views of several individuals are assuredly preferable to one man, even as the power of a number of men is of course greater than the power of one man. Thus consultation is acceptable in the presence of the Almighty, and hath been enjoined upon the believers.” (Compilation 1991, 1:97-98, no. 182)

In the Bahá'í community, however, as developed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, individuals do not have authority. There are individuals who have special designations, such as Hands of the Cause, Counsellors, and the Afnán, but these designations are only honorary or confer opportunities for service to the Bahá'í community. Such roles as these individuals may have in the Bahá'í community are advisory and exhortatory. They have no authority. Authority belongs only to elected institutions.

2. Oral Transmission and Gnostic Knowledge. With regard to authoritative transmission of the scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith, the official position is almost the exact opposite of what is to be found in most mystical orders. In the Bahá'í Faith, all are encouraged to read the scriptures for themselves and to gain their own understanding of them. The scriptures and authoritative texts consist only of material that was written down either by one of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith or was seen and approved by them. Material that has been orally transmitted even through just one transmitter has no binding authority. Shoghi Effendi has laid down the principle that the Bahá'ís should not attribute much importance to talks, reported to have been given by the Master, if these have not in one form or other obtained his sanction.

Bahá'u'lláh has made it clear enough that only those things that have been revealed in the form of Tablets have a binding power over the friends. Hearsays may be a matter of interest but

can in no way claim authority. This basic teaching of Bahá'u'lláh was to preserve the Faith from being corrupted like Islam which attributes binding authority to all the reported sayings of Muhammad. This being a basic principle of the Faith we should not confuse Tablets that were actually revealed and mere talks attributed to the founders of the Cause. The first have absolute binding authority while the lat-

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ter can in no way claim our obedience. The highest thing this can achieve is to influence the activities of the one who has heard the saying in person. (Hornby 1988, 438-439, no. 1435) We have seen above that these traditions of oral transmission through master-initiate relationships are regarded by Bahá'u'lláh as not merely perpetuating the phenomenon of religious leadership, which He condemns, but also leading to spiritual stagnation in that each generation merely continues the insights and guidance that it has inherited and does not push forward the boundaries of human spiritual achievement.

Bahá'u'lláh calls upon His followers to “[t]ear asunder, in My Name, the veils that have grievously blinded your vision, and, through the power born of your belief in the unity of God, scatter the idols of vain imitation”

(1983, 143, no. 75). Each Bahá'í is instructed to know of his/her own knowledge, to investigate reality and judge matters independently for himself/herself:

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and

neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour.

(Bahá'u'lláh 1990, Arabic 2)

'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses this need for human beings to free themselves of blind imitation of religious leaders and spiritual masters and to investigate reality for themselves:

God has given man the eye of investigation by which he may see and recognize truth. He has endowed man

with ears that he may hear the message of reality and conferred upon him the gift of reason by which he

may discover things for himself. This is his endowment and equipment for the investigation of reality. Man

is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another's ears nor comprehend with another's

brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and

responsibility in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation; otherwise, you will be utterly submerged in the sea of ignorance and deprived of all the bounties of God. Turn to God, supplicate humbly at His threshold, seeking assistance and confirmation, that God may rend asunder the veils that obscure your vision. Then will your eyes be filled with illumination, face to face you will behold the reality of God and your heart become completely purified from the dross of ignorance, reflecting the glories and bounties of the Kingdom. (1982, 293)

3. Monasticism or asceticism. We have seen above that Bahá'u'lláh forbade monastic seclusion and called upon the monks to emerge from their monasteries and to take an active role in society. Having criticised and dismissed many aspects of the existing mystical communities, Bahá'u'lláh was faced with the task of creating an alternative structure that would replace the role of the monastery, that would give the guidance and support upon the mystical path that was provided in the traditional monastic setting. Of course, Bahá'u'lláh had to operate within the historical reality of His time. The Bahá'í community was a persecuted minority with much of its energy and efforts being spent in merely surviving. Therefore Bahá'u'lláh was compelled to delay much of the implementation of His ideas. He laid down the principles but left it to His successors, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, to bring these ideas to reality. Thus in considering the creation of the Bahá'í community as a mystical order, we must look across the whole of the history of the Bahá'í Faith in order to discern its features.

There are various features of Bahá'í community life that allow it to function as a supportive environment for spiritual development and the mystical life. The first is the fact that most community activity is carried out in an environment of prayer and devotion. Second that the individual members of the community are encouraged to interact with each other in such a way as to promote love and unity. Third, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits backbiting in the community, since He states that it "quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul." (Bahá'u'lláh 1983, 265)

In brief, what Shoghi Effendi and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have tried to create is a religious community that is sufficiently supportive to allow the individuals in it to develop themselves

spiritually within a “safe” environment as a replacement for the monastic environment.

4. Mystical Practices. There are a number of practices used by mystics to which Bahá'u'lláh did give His qualified assent. Certain mystical systems believe that the very vibrations of the chanting of holy verses themselves have an effect. Thus, for example, in Yoga mantras should be said in a voice that is “alive and resonant” so that it may “utilize the power of sound vibrations to influence modalities of consciousness.” (Hewitt 1991,

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442). Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh instructs that His words be chanted in “in the most melodious of tones” (1992,

116). He further exhorts the Bahá'ís:

Gather ye together with the utmost joy and fellowship and recite the verses revealed by the merciful Lord.

By so doing the doors to true knowledge will be opened to your inner beings, and ye will then feel your souls endowed with steadfastness and your hearts filled with radiant joy.

(Compilation 1991, 1:188, no.

364)

There is a reference, moreover, in the Bahá'í scriptures to

Bahá'u'lláh having ordained a certain night for

those who wish to carry out repetitive chanting (dhikr) activities.

While in the barracks, Bahá'u'lláh set apart a special night and He

dedicated it to Darvish Sidq-‘ Alí. He

wrote that every year on that night the dervishes should bedeck a meeting place, which should be in a

flower garden, and gather there to make mention of God [dhikr].

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá 1971, 38)

In the main, however, Bahá'u'lláh turns the attention of the Bahá'ís

towards practices of individual devo-

tion such as prayer and meditation upon the Bahá'í scriptures, and away from specific techniques which lead

to states of trance or ecstasy.

Process and Progress

As well as establishing the Bahá'í community as an alternative to the traditional mystical communities,

Bahá'u'lláh has ensured that the workings of the Bahá'í community

facilitate and enhance the process of mys-

tical progress and spiritual advancement. Thus, for example, many authors of texts on mysticism in the past

have emphasised the importance of willing obedience to the master or spiritual guide. This obedience is nec-

essary both to ensure compliance with the master's instructions but also to

enable the initiate to develop spiritual qualities such as humility and detachment. In the Bahá'í community, the same result is achieved through the concept of the Covenant. This concept means that each generation of Bahá'ís agrees to obey the institutions of the Centre of the Covenant— 'Abdu'l-Bahá, followed by Shoghi Effendi, followed by the Universal House of Justice. In day-to-day terms, Bahá'ís currently obey the local and national institution of the Bahá'í community in the place where they live. Although full discussion and consultation is encouraged in the process leading up to a decision, once these institutions have made a decision, it is expected that all Bahá'ís will obey this, whether or not they agree with the decision. This allows the same spiritual processes that occur through obedience—suppression of the ego, the development of humility, and detachment from one's own fond notions and preconceived ideas.

We have seen above that consultation can be a source of spiritual guidance for Bahá'ís. It is also however, in its very process a way of enhancing spiritual development. The qualities that need to be cultivated in order for good consultation to occur, whether this be consultation over the meaning of the text or over an administrative matter, are also qualities that are needed for the spiritual progress of the individual.

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 87, no. 43)

'Abdu'l-Bahá also writes of the need for "courtesy, dignity, care and moderation" (in Compilation 1991, 1:95, no. 176) as a pre-condition for consultation. In short, the development of many of the virtues that progress human beings along the mystical path are facilitated by engagement in the process of consultation.

And both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have encouraged the use of this consultative process in all aspects of both personal and community life:

Settle all things, both great and small, by consultation. Without prior consultation, take no important step in your own personal affairs. Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another's projects and plans. Grieve over one another. Let none in the whole country go in need.

Befriend one another until ye
become as a single body, one and all . . . (‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Compilation
1991, 1:98-9, no. 185)

In this way, the whole of one’s life as a Bahá’í becomes a continuous
chance to consult and thus to improve
these qualities and progress along the mystic path.

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We have seen above that Bahá’u’lláh prohibits the isolation of the
monastic community and instructs the
monks to emerge from their monasteries. Instead He creates the Bahá’í
community, in which He encourages
as much diversity as possible—Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and
Shoghi Effendi always called Bahá’ís to seek
out new and diverse groups to bring into the community. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, for
example, encouraged the American
Bahá’ís to bring the black races into the Bahá’í community, even though
He knew that this would be a great
test for the white Bahá’ís. Shoghi Effendi encouraged and reported as a
great success the enrolment of new
races and tribes into the Bahá’í community. The Universal House of Justice
has also encouraged Bahá’ís to
seek to enrol members of all classes and strata of society. Thus, while in a
monastic community the monks
interacted with others who were of much the same cultural and social outlook as
themselves, in the Bahá’í
community one is exposed to every type of person and to types of cultural and
social outlooks that clash with
one’s own. This creates a situation in which tests arise due to conflicting
outlooks of individual Bahá’ís. Thus,
commonly, the greatest tests and difficulties for Bahá’ís arise from their
interactions with other Bahá’ís. (This
being indeed a reflection of Bahá’u’lláh’s own experience: “My
imprisonment doeth Me no harm, neither the
tribulations I suffer, nor the things that have befallen Me at the hands of My
oppressors. That which harmeth
Me is the conduct of those who, though they bear My name, yet commit that which
maketh My heart and My
pen to lament.” Bahá’u’lláh 1988, 23)

As a consequence of this great variety of people interacting within the
Bahá’í community, there will always
tend to be great differences of opinion. The important factor in allowing this
potentially unstable mixture to
continue without exploding and splitting into sects is the concept of the
Covenant. The source of the unity of
the Bahá’í Faith is not a uniformity of doctrine and thought or the strict
regimentation of a Holy Law, it is loy-

alty to the Covenant. As long as Bahá'ís maintain this loyalty, they are free to have widely differing ideas about the Bahá'í Faith. But this very freedom will inevitably be a source of irritation and tests to their fellow-believers, who think differently from them. Western ways of doing things will clash with Eastern ways; conservatives will be offended by radicals; liberals will be frustrated by fundamentalists. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that it is through meeting and overcoming tests that human beings grow spiritually (1971, 49-51). Thus in the dynamics of the social interactions of the Bahá'í community and under the umbrella of the unity brought about by the Covenant, one's spiritual qualities of love, patience, forbearance and empathy are put to the test and refined. The social dynamics of the Bahá'í community and the resultant development of spiritual qualities has been discussed further by Daniel C. Jordan: When one joins a Bahá'í Community, he joins a family of extremely diverse human beings with whom he will have to work and establish meaningful relationships. The first thing he finds out is that his old repertoire of responses is no longer adequate. So many different human beings represent a great many unknowns, and trying to relate to those unknowns creates energy (anxiety) which sets that reciprocal process of knowing and loving through faith and courage in motion. Defining a legitimate goal which will constructively utilize the energy from that anxiety will call forth a new repertoire of responses. Each new response is a bit of one's latent capacity made manifest—a release of human potential. Another way of saying it is that the Bahá'í Community offers more opportunities for knowing and loving under growth-fostering circumstances than can be found anywhere else. . . . Thus the Bahá'í community, because of its diversity, provides many of those tests which are essential for our development. At the same time, guidance from Bahá'í institutions and the commitment of members of the community to accept each other for what they can become provides the courage to turn those tests into vehicles for spiritual development—for the release of human potential (n.d., 13-14). One function of the spiritual master or guide in traditional mystical communities has been to act as a corrective to delusions and self-deceptions that all are prone to. The processes of consultation and community interactions provide the corrective mechanism in the Bahá'í community. It

is very easy to think that one has achieved such qualities as patience and love if one is in an isolated cocoon in a monastic setting. It is much more difficult to be self-deluded when one is interacting in a diverse community and trying to consult with individuals of a widely differing social, cultural and educational background to oneself.

Lastly, in the processes of the Bahá'í community that lead to spiritual development and progress, great emphasis is given to the concept of service. Thus for example, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá is enumerating what will lead to the mystic's goal of nearness to the Divine, He includes service to humanity and service in the cause

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of universal peace among these pre-requisites.

Bahá'u'lláh proclaims in the Hidden Words that God inspires His servants and is revealed through them.

He says, "Thy heart is My home; sanctify it for My descent. Thy spirit is My place of revelation; cleanse

it for My manifestation." Therefore, we learn that nearness to God is possible through devotion to Him,

through entrance into the Kingdom and service to humanity; it is attained by unity with mankind and

through loving-kindness to all; it is dependent upon investigation of truth, acquisition of praiseworthy

virtues, service in the cause of universal peace and personal sanctification.

In a word, nearness to God

necessitates sacrifice of self, severance and the giving up of all to Him.

Nearness is likeness. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 148)

This teaching of the Bahá'í Faith is intended as a corrective to the tendency, described above, for some to

think that because they think they have reached a certain spiritual station, they can indulge in a life of idleness

and seclusion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares that, on the contrary, the closer one becomes to the Divine, the higher

one's mystical ascent, and the more one engages in service to other human beings, the more interactions one

has with individuals who are unlike oneself, and therefore more tests come one's way. Thus it is also through

service that one's spiritual qualities are extended and refined.

This aspect of service is, at present, mainly an individual endeavour. Its role in Bahá'í community life is as

yet undeveloped. It will only come to fruition with the development of the institution of the Mashriqu'l-

Adhkár, the dependencies of which are intended to "afford relief to the

suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant.” (Shoghi Effendi 1968, 184) As the institution of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár develops, the Bahá’í community will increasingly adopt a service ethos and thus this avenue for the spiritual development of the individual will be enhanced.

In summary, the Bahá’í administration is not just the organization of a mystical community, but has been set up precisely so that its very functioning is itself the promotion of the spiritual development of the individual.

The processes of the Bahá’í community act in a similar manner to give the individual the maximum chance of spiritual progress and a way of assessing this progress and avoiding self-deception.

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