



Fullness of Life (New York: Ballentine, 1999), calls the magisteria (authorities) of science and religion. He explicates a principle of non-overlapping magisteria, or NOMA for short. (See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-overlapping\\_magisteria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-overlapping_magisteria).)

To Gould, who defines himself as "a scientist by profession and a theological skeptic and nonparticipant by confession" (59), these two magisteria have equal status, in terms of the relative importance he assigns to science and religion (59-63), and independent, since, he believes, they do not overlap (65).

For instance, Gould contends that NOMA challenges certain forms of religious belief, such as what he calls "fundamentalist extremism" (93), while simultaneously upholding the value of religion in a more general sense. If, he says, a religionist entertains the view that the earth is merely several thousand years old, such a belief is in violation of NOMA. Likewise, he argues (94), should a scientist claim the right to determine the advantages and utilities of an invention because of having invented it and due to her more exact knowledge of its technical aspects than others, she would be invading the moral authority of religion.

Turning his attention to "scientific creationism," Gould, one of the better known neo-Darwinists, writes (148), "Creationists do not represent the magisterium of religion." He then continues (149), "The enemy is not religion but dogmatism and intolerance, a tradition as old as humankind ...." Gould cautions against merely laughing at the phenomenon of creation science, claiming that "... history features the principle that risible stalking horses, if unchecked at the starting gate, often grow into powerful champions of darkness." Moreover, the Scopes monkey trial's William Jennings Bryan, according to Gould (154), confused scientific truth with moral, or religious, truth and, in so doing, mistakenly assumed that Darwin, in developing his model of the struggle for existence, was implying an inherent virtuousness to the process of natural selection (Herbert Spencer's "natural selection").

Darwin himself, according to Gould (192), understood the principle of NOMA. Darwin did not, Gould said, use the theory of evolution to promote atheism, nor did he maintain that a concept of God could never be reconciled with the structure of nature. In Gould's own words (192):

Rather, he [Darwin] argued that nature's factuality, as read within the magisterium of science, could not resolve, or even specify, the existence or character of God, the ultimate meaning of life, the proper foundations of morality, or any other question within the different magisterium of religion. If many Western thinkers had once invoked a blinkered and indefensible concept of divinity to declare the impossibility of evolution, Darwin would not make the same arrogant mistake in the opposite direction, and claim that the fact of evolution implies the nonexistence of God.

Gould (198) further differentiates between Darwin's teleology (view of purposefulness) and his science. He suggests that Darwin may very well have had a personal preference for conceiving of nature as a consequence of overall

design. However, Gould says that Darwin knew that issues such as this one cannot be determined within the magisterium of science. Darwin denies, Gould says, that one may hope to locate, through an examination of the evolutionary process ("nature's factuality"), moral guidance for conducting one's life.

Gould's interpretation of Darwin (199-200) suggests that he may have believed in an ultimate meaning and purpose of the universe, while he recognized that science falls "below the purview" of such philosophical questions. We may, Gould says, apply the laws of nature to the construction of general theories or to the assessment of general patterns. Furthermore, we can, he insists, "know 'what' and 'how,' even 'why' in the special sense of explaining particular facts by the invariant laws of nature and properties of materials. But science has no access to questions of ultimate 'why' expressed as overarching purpose or eternal value."

Gould has no interest in what he terms a "false fusion" between science and religion (211). Rather, he encourages each side to mind their own turfs, to propose solutions to their respective corners of the totality of life, and to dialogue with each other from a place of mutual respect and optimism.

Gould refers, in terms not all too complimentary, to a duo of alternate approaches to the reconciliation of science and religion (212-221). The first he calls the syncretic school and the second, political correctness. In his words (212):

The syncretic school continues to embrace the oldest fallacy of all as a central premise: the claim that science and religion should fuse to one big, happy family, or rather one big pod of peas, where the facts of science reinforce and validate the precepts of religion, and where God shows his hand (and mind) in the workings of nature.

In modern versions of syncretism, he argues, the dramatic success of science has contributed to the view that its conclusions must be endorsed a priori, while religious hermeneutics should be uncritically adapted in order to conform to the magisterium of science. Thus, in an apparent attempt to reconcile biblical views of origins with geologic evidence, many syncretists, especially those who contend that the Genesis accounts of creation occurred under ten-thousand years ago, inquire as to the role of God in the Big Bang.

The other "irenicism," according to Gould, emphasizes the value of political correctness. "The syncretists may be silly, but at least they talk and try," he wrote (220). On the other hand, those advocating the second position would simply rather avoid conflict by minimizing communication or by addressing one another in such meaningless euphemisms that no substance or meaning can possibly emerge. The result would be a peaceful coexistence in which scientists agreed to be silent on religion, and professional religionists "swore that the troublesome S-word would never pass their lips" (221).

In the final pages of the book, Gould writes (221):

NOMA does cherish the separate status of science and religion - regarding each

as a distinctive institution, a rock for all our ages, offering vital contributions to human understanding. But NOMA rejects the two paths to irenicism on either side of its own tough-minded and insistent search for fruitful dialogue - the false and illogical union of syncretism, and the perverse proposal of "political correctness" that peace may best be secured by the "three monkeys" solution of covering eyes, ears, and mouth.

The non-overlapping magisteria of science and religion must greet each other with respect and interest on the most distinctively human field of talk.

### The Structural Dialectics Paradigm of Liberation Spirituality

Structural dialectics combines an approach to the Bahá'í teaching of unity in diversity, as teleology or metaphysics, with an integral sociological perspective on social structure. The result has been an original form of critical realism - quite distinct, for instance, from Roy Bhaskar's neo-Marxist "dialectical critical realism" (Dialectics: The Pulse of Freedom. London: Verso. 1993.) and from Ben F. Meyer's "hermeneutics of critical realism" (Critical Realism and the New Testament. Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications. 1989). It may be regarded as critical realist simply in that it rejects ontological relativism while affirming epistemological relativism. Structural dialectics was, moreover, formulated without knowledge of these other approaches to critical realism.

Structural dialectics is, above all, an orientation to liberation spirituality and theology. It suggests a system of praxis which may, if implemented, reduce such oppressive systems of social polity and governance which have so often resulted in war, unreasonable consumption, "enlightened self-interest," and a host of other egoisms and materialisms. From this standpoint, the structural dialectics paradigm joins a number of other liberation theologies, including Matthew Fox's creation spirituality.

From the standpoint of structural dialectics, there are two dimensions of social structure. The first might be designated as intersubjective structure. The second could be referred to as objective structure. Intersubjective structures are shared mentalities or psychosocial cognitive matrices. Objective structures represents a particular type of social organization. Unlike intersubjective structures, objective structures are material and concrete.

Based on direct observation of socioeconomic and demographic variation between social strata (objective structures), a researcher might infer the existence of stratifying intersubjective structures. However, she is unable to directly observe (with my senses) those frameworks of inequality.

However, through attitudinal surveys and intensive interviews the social scientist can probe into these underlying, psychosocial frameworks. So, when a set of commonalities in statuses and roles are identified in a population as pertinent to a particular social fact, such as science and religion, we term it an intersubjective structure or institution.

Both levels of structure feed into one another through the dialectical process

of reflection. We reflect what actually exists (objective structures and institutions) in the context of our a priori mental frameworks (intersubjective structures and institutions). The social fact of life in a world of objective racial inequality is internalized - reinforcing the (collective) intersubjective structures which are formed during childhood. In turn, the collectively shared intersubjective structures are projected onto experience and perpetuate objective structures of inequality. Social stratification continues to exist, respecting to race, gender, class, age, and ethnicity, in many social institutions, including science and religion.

Non-material culture (ideologies, values, knowledge, and language) and material culture (artifacts) are both products of intersubjective and objective structure. In other words, what we both believe and possess are derived from our statuses. As a result, both aspects of culture are, according to the existing system of social stratification or differentiation, structured on the basis of power and resource allocation.

Any intersubjective structure, such as race, class, or gender, consists of a particular pattern of statuses (positions) and roles (arrangements of norms, or sets of behavioral guidelines, which instruct people on how to relate to other statuses). These intersubjective structures are perpetuated intergenerationally through socialization, and they are reinforced by living in a world in which they are seen objectively or materially in forms of (frequently stratified) social organization or objective structure.

Intersubjective structures will be treated as frameworks of collective consciousness or matrices of knowledge internalized by populations and groups of statuses (positions) and roles (the behaviors expected from people occupying particular statuses when interacting with others possessing the same or different social statuses) and how they are organized (linked in affinity) in various social contexts.

The types of intersubjective structures, or frameworks, common to particular societies are expressions of the dominant structural mentality or collective consciousness (conscience). I refer to these mentalities or modes of consciousness as conflictive (sensory, diverse, attributional, or existing in the world of outward appearances) and integrative (synthesizing, unifying, reflective, hermeneutic, or existing in the world of ideal forms). Together, these mentalities are stages in the dialectical (rational) process of accomplishing synthesis out of observable conflict.

In the conflictive mentality there is diversity without unity. However, in the integrative mentality, social reality (diversity) is framed in a dialectical metaphysics of unity in diversity (focusing on the unifying factors in human populations). Communication patterns are restructured from a polarizing frame of contentiousness (making absolute assumptions of right and wrong) to one based on cooperative problem-solving.

The dominant structural mentality is typically demonstrated by those in positions of power. Structures often frame the world into permutations of

oppressor and oppressed statuses. In addition, it is frequently to the advantage of power elites to promote chaos and conflict among the disenfranchised in order to maintain their social control.

Collective consciousness and its constituent structures are products of history. They change with the its procession and as humans, acting within a structural context, respond to socially and personally significant challenges and crises.

We now divagate from considering the intersubjective aspect of structure and now focus on more concrete patterns of resource allocation and on culture. Objective social structure consists of variations in wealth, property, and other resources. It is also geographic or spatial (human ecological, in other words). In addition, it includes the concrete acts people engage in (derived from their statuses and roles) and the manners in which people label the objects in their environment (also framed by their statuses and roles). Objective structure is mutually dependent with the intersubjective structures of prestige and power.

Objective structure consists of observable social differentiation and stratification, on the one hand, and cultural artifacts (the distribution of those artifacts, observable behavior, and the labels attached to people and things in our environment), on the other. As such, it is amenable to empirical investigation, while intersubjective structure can, by definition, be only indirectly observed by reference to its objective correspondent. Intersubjective structure and objective structure are interdependent and exist in dialectical tension with one another.

Cultures, as total ways of life, and subcultures, which are embedded in the larger culture, may be regarded as the ephemeral correlates of collective consciousness and the idealized, or formal, social structures which those mentalities incorporate. They are, to use Ken Wilber's term (borrowed from anthropologist Arthur Koestler), holons, and holons within holons (Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*. Boston: Shambhala. 1995). In a holarchy, or hierarchy of holons, each holon, or structure, appears as a self-sufficient whole, until it is viewed in the context of the next more inclusive holon.

Structure is a creation of history. At the present historical moment, the collective consciousness or structural mentality should, perhaps, be reconstructed from one so heavily dominated by social conflict to one which resolves relative contradictions within the context of unity in diversity.

Ultimately, social structural change is realized in a dialectic between people acting under the influence of particular structures, and the forces of history. Such change is the consequence of how society, in the context of existing structures, collectively responds to the challenges of history. It is not the property of individuals and their biographies.

Beyond the Principle of Non-Overlapping Magisteria

In developing a structural dialectics of science and religion, at least four factors should probably be considered: first, the nature of science and of religion; second, the purpose of religion in relation to science; third, the role of science with respect to religion; and fourth, an appreciation for ambiguity.

The teachings of the Bahá'í Faith clearly regard both science and religion as agencies of human development, as expressions of divinity, and as instruments for conformity to God's Will or Covenant. Science, for its part, presents a bottom-up perspective. The sciences become "bridges to reality" (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 110) through uncovering the names and attributes of God, the divine appearance to the senses, in the kingdoms of creation.

Collaterally, from the top-down viewpoint provided by religion, God, through His Intermediary, the Prophet, reveals His purpose, the acquisition of virtues, and His methodology, creation and re-creation, to humanity. While biologists can study evolution, creation is a matter concerning religion. Science possesses neither the tools to examine it nor the tests to verify it.

These two domains of knowledge, though complementary, are not really separate. As Bahá'u'lláh, alluding to the cyclic theory of Abú-'Alí Síná (Avicenna), wrote (The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys 24-25; see also Kitáb-i-Íqán 184), "Knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it." While there will be the inevitable ambiguities resulting from human limitations in perception, as interdependent structures, their respective functions in collective and individual human experience are simultaneously distinguishable from one another and essentially intertwined.

There may be at least two meanings given to religion in the Bahá'í Teachings:

We may, first, refer to religion as that which God reveals relative to the needs and capabilities of the human collective at the time of Revelation. Regarded in this sense, religion includes both the eternal religion of God (similar to Muhammad's perennial use of the term Islám) and the social principles and laws revealed by the Prophet. In this sense, religion is not a mere syncretistic combination of other religious beliefs and practices.

Second, the religion that humanity accepts is longitudinally and demographically variable and relative. From this vantage point, religion is identical with the structure, or configuration of statuses and roles, of a moral community. It may also be regarded as the routinization, or institutionalization, of the charisma (magnetic authority) of the Prophet. From this perspective, religion is a syncretistic expression of diverse encounters with the sacred.

Science, which is generally regarded as a method of research, not as a belief system or guide to human behavior, is, in so far as its ability to either wreak havoc with society or to provide it with material benefits, neutral. Religion, on the other hand, is both a framework of beliefs and an embodiment of moral

praxes (practices) and can, left in the hands of unscrupulous persons, cause great harm.

Much like Gould's principle of non-overlapping magisteria, the Bahá'í teachings appear to delegate distinct realms of authority to science and religion. Science and religion have influenced one another's development throughout history, and that that relationship might be expected to continue. However, rather than combining these two into an undifferentiated whole, as argued against by Gould, we might attempt to deduce, from the Bahá'í teachings, their defined functions, and which of these authorities, or magisteria, would ultimately prevail in any apparent dispute between them.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Western talks, while not a part of the Bahá'í scriptural canon and possessing considerably less authority than His tablets, dwell repeatedly on the subject of science and religion. From a historical, if not a religious, perspective, the sheer number of these references, reported by independent transcribers, is certainly compelling. The following is typical of His reported comments on this theme (The Promulgation of Universal Peace 107):

The third principle or teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the oneness of religion and science. Any religious belief which is not conformable with scientific proof and investigation is superstition, for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond. Religious teaching which is at variance with science and reason is human invention and imagination unworthy of acceptance, for the antithesis and opposite of knowledge is superstition born of the ignorance of man. If we say religion is opposed to science, we lack knowledge of either true science or true religion, for both are founded upon the premises and conclusions of reason, and both must bear its test. In a talk given in Paris (Paris Talks 143) in 1912, He also explains the purpose of religion relative to science: Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.

Likewise, the House of Justice, in a letter written on its behalf, dated July 20, 1997, wrote: Problems will arise, rather, if an attempt is made to impose, on the Bahá'í community's own study of the Revelation, materialistic methodologies and attitudes antithetical to its very nature. The Faith is not the possession of any among us, but belongs to Bahá'u'lláh. Through the Covenant, which is a distinguishing feature of His Revelation, He has specified in unmistakable terms the means by which He wills to preserve the integrity of His message and to guide the implementation of His prescriptions for humankind. If one accepts the Bahá'í Teachings, one cannot, in good conscience, claim to be studying the Faith while ignoring the centrality of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant to all aspects of the religion He has established.

It seems evident from the above that science is intended to prevent religion from becoming superstitious and non-scientific, while the purpose of religion is, in this case, to provide science with a moral compass, including the avoidance of materialist viewpoints, and with teleological guidance, such as is provided by the Bahá'í Covenant.

Notwithstanding, it is probably unrealistic, given the obvious particularities in the epistemologies of science and religion, to expect that differences in perspective would never arise between these two agencies of human thought. The avoidance of an often well-intentioned, but generally divisive, religious rigidity, fundamentalism, and scriptural literalism, on the one hand, and of methodological approaches - perhaps metamethodology would be a useful term - which ignore spiritually based values and divine purpose may be essential prerequisites for those wishing to appreciate the harmony science and religion from a clear-headed and an open-minded perspective.

This lack of balance between science and religion contributed to one of this century's most devastating culture wars - that between scientifically-influenced religious modernism and anti-evolutionary religious conservatism (see James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books. 1992). Indeed, any system which fails to account for the complementary nature of these two social institutions may risk widening a divide which frequently characterizes contemporary debate on this subject and, given the inability of the scientific method to empirically determine morality and purpose, producing ethical and teleological contradictions.

A letter, dated May 17, 1995, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to this writer, discussed ambiguity in the relations between science and religion:

With regard to the harmony of science and religion, the Writings of the Central Figures and the commentaries of the Guardian make abundantly clear that the task of humanity, including the Bahá'í community that serves as the "leaven" within it, is to create a global civilization which embodies both the spiritual and material dimensions of existence. The nature and scope of such a civilization are still beyond anything the present generation can conceive. The prosecution of this vast enterprise will depend on a progressive interaction between the truths and principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry. This entails living with ambiguities as a natural and inescapable feature of the process of exploring reality. It also requires us not to limit science to any particular school of thought or methodological approach postulated in the course of its development. The challenge facing Bahá'í thinkers is to provide responsible leadership in this endeavour, since it is they who have both the priceless insights of the Revelation and the advantages conferred by scientific investigation.

Facing ambiguity requires intellectual and spiritual humility and an awareness of the enormity of human limitations. Science, it is suggested, must not degenerate into an Enlightenment scientism, attempting to encompass religion

within its magisteria, nor must religion, for its part, dictate to scientists what conclusions they should expect to find, while dogmatically insisting on operationalizing the concepts in what are taken to be literal scriptural propositions and converting them to hypotheses. Approaches such as these, which discourage meaningful dialogue, characterize what has been referred to as the conflictive structural mentality. It is diversity without unity. In this case, one social institution is being placed in a position of unfair dominance over the other.

An integrative structural mentality would be based on the perspective given in the Bahá'í teachings regarding the complementarity between science and religion. The underlying intersubjective structure of unity in diversity, centered on a recognition of the Unity of God expressed in the diversity of existence, might gradually manifest itself in an objective structure of global community, world order, and universal culture. Power will be taken out of the hands of individuals and given to democratically elected, consultative bodies. In the New Testament, these two levels of structure may be what is meant, respectively, by the Kingdom of God within (Luke 17:21) and Kingdom of God on earth (Matthew 6:10 and Luke 11:2).

Structures provide groups and individuals with a contextual basis for their own lived-in experiences of the world. Through them, an epistemological relativism, also called critical realism or perspectivism, is possible. That is to say, reality can be observed from different collective standpoints without postulating the existence of multiple realities. Therefore, epistemological relativism is ontologically absolute. It recognizes that objective reality exists even while asserting that multiple perspectives are possible and, indeed, inevitable.

Moreover, science and religion are structures, or social institutions, as well. They involve complex relationships between human resources values, norms, assumptions, modes of praxis. Each of them, as holons or structures, operate within a more generalized knowledge system. Thus, while Gould's position is apparently nominalistic, the one adopted here is critical realist. Science and religion are social structures, not merely names for accidental juxtaposition.

Certainly, any methodology can incorporate bias (the prejudices of the researcher, for instance). However, unlike some of the postmodernists, no claim is made that objective reality itself varies according to context (or paradigm) or that all methods are terminally locked into biased modes of operating. Both perspectives debase the scientific enterprise to little more than sympathetic magic. The first reduces objective existence to subjective text which can be manipulated at will and deconstructed to reveal the bias of the constructor (such as the scientist). The second, frequently termed ontological relativism, reduces the scientific method to a mere metanarrative (a postmodernist perjorative) which can likewise be deconstructed or demonstrated to result from the supposed biases of scientists. It also deems scientific findings to be products of social construction or of solipsism and fails to distinguish between method and methodology. Indeed, postmodernism is frequently both

epistemologically and ontologically relativist. Borrowing an expression, it turns positivism on its head, so to speak.

So, whereas method may be defined as a set of investigative principles and guidelines, such as the scientific method, a methodology, or research design, is the application of those principles and guidelines to the systematic study of a particular problem. However, the epistemological, but not ontological, relativism of the scientific method means that science provides us with one profoundly useful way, among others ways, to view structural reality. Although it is neither biased nor culture-bound, it does recognize the importance of methodological pluralism and the value of triangulation (multiple methodologies for examining the same subject matter). It does not scientistically subsume all knowledge, such as religious knowledge, under the rubric of science.

#### Infallibility: Sinlessness and Prophetic Ecology

An empirical proposition is a logical statement which can be shown, based on an observation of the data (scientific testing, historical examination, etc.) to be true or false. Thus, "Socrates is a man" is an empirical proposition. "Socrates is an immortal soul" is not.

While scripture certainly contains propositional, factual, and evaluatory statements, to analyze passages and verses without regard to their textual context, or to fail to consider whether they are used as illustration or allegories, may lead the exegete to various misleading interpretations. Thus, scriptural materialism, or textual reductionism, may be defined as the ascription of infallibility to, sometimes decontextualized, scriptural passages. It presumes that infallibility, or constancy in the Will of God, is grammatical and syntactical.

Rather, it appears to this writer that infallibility, as perfection or pure virtuouness, is a spiritual, not a literary, condition. As such, the Prophet uses language as a limited, contextualized instrument, an outward expression of the Word of God which can be recited ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 143), in order to enable the reader, through authoritative and private interpretations, to connect with that divine perfection - the Word, or knowledge, of God (the Logos) - which is one of the conditions of Prophethood. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained (Some Answered Questions 207-208):

But the proceeding through manifestation (if by this is meant the divine appearance, and not division into parts), we have said, is the proceeding and the appearance of the Holy Spirit and the Word, which is from God. As it is said in the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God"; then the Holy Spirit and the Word are the appearance of God. The Spirit and the Word mean the divine perfections that appeared in the Reality of Christ, and these perfections were with God; so the sun manifests all its glory in the mirror. For the Word does not signify the body of Christ, no, but the divine perfections manifested in Him. For Christ was like a clear mirror which was facing the Sun of Reality; and the perfections of the Sun of Reality--that

is to say, its light and heat--were visible and apparent in this mirror. If we look into the mirror, we see the sun, and we say, "It is the sun." Therefore, the Word and the Holy Spirit, which signify the perfections of God, are the divine appearance. This is the meaning of the verse in the Gospel which says: "The Word was with God, and the Word was God"; for the divine perfections are not different from the Essence of Oneness. The perfections of Christ are called the Word because all the beings are in the condition of letters, and one letter has not a complete meaning, while the perfections of Christ have the power of the word because a complete meaning can be inferred from a word. As the Reality of Christ was the manifestation of the divine perfections, therefore, it was like the word. Why? because He is the sum of perfect meanings. This is why He is called the Word.

It appears as though the Most Great Infallibility, the innate infallibility of the Prophet, is the Word or knowledge of God (and the moral guidance provided by that Word). Scripture is Logos in that it is a discourse about that knowledge. Conferred infallibility, such as of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian, and the Universal House of Justice, is the reflection of that knowledge (the Logos), to varying degrees, within persons and institutions.

The Guardian affirmed that the Qur'án and the scriptures of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths were the "absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God" (The Advent of Divine Justice 49). On the surface, this statement may appear to support textual infallibility (scriptural materialism). Another possibility, however, is that he was asserting that these Sacred Texts, unlike the books of the Bible, contain the words of the Prophet without interpolation. Whether, with respect to the Qur'án, his information was accurate, may be a matter for historians to evaluate.

Much of Bahá'í scripture is symbolic. Sensible figures are used to express intellectual realities ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions 84). However, all statements, either symbolic or literal, it is suggested, consist of historically and culturally conditioned statements. Moreover, context may perhaps be regarded as the map of scripture. It serves as a guide to meaning, both symbolic and literal.

Furthermore, as these scriptural meanings are revealed in particular cultural and historical contexts, illustrations and parables, such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations of ether and evolution, might be thought of, not as literal statements of truth, but, rather, as a form of contextually based discourse. The following statement was included in a letter, dated February 8, 1998, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer:

Although, in conveying His Revelation, the Manifestation uses the language and culture of the country into which He is born, He is not confined to using terminology with the same connotations as those given to it by His predecessors or contemporaries; He delivers His message in a form which His audience, both immediate and in centuries to come, is capable of grasping.

First and foremost, the concept of scriptural materialism may be reductionistic (reducing divine guidance to vocabulary and syntax). It conflates the literary

and historical context of divine Revelation, which is inseparable from scripture, with truth and reality. Additionally, it sometimes neglects a proper consideration the humanity, or human side, of the Messenger, in His words and His actions, which is the baseline for any Prophetic ecology. That is to say, a sophisticated scriptural hermeneutics relies on a consideration of the material, or ecological, circumstances attending a Prophet's Ministry as a matrix for spiritual insight. One result of failing to recognize the cultural and historical context of scripture and other domains of religious authority (such as the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice) may, as previously discussed, be the extraction of an illustration from a text as if it were necessarily intended by its author to be a literal statement, or proposition, of truth.

Consider the following passage from the *Isbráqát*, (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh 108):

Know thou that the term "Infallibility" hath numerous meanings and divers stations. In one sense it is applicable to the One Whom God hath made immune from error. Similarly it is applied to every soul whom God hath guarded against sin, transgression, rebellion, impiety, disbelief and the like. However, the Most Great Infallibility is confined to the One Whose station is immeasurably exalted beyond ordinances or prohibitions and is sanctified from errors and omissions. Indeed He is a Light which is not followed by darkness and a Truth not overtaken by error. Were He to pronounce water to be wine or heaven to be earth or light to be fire, He speaketh the truth and no doubt would there be about it; and unto no one is given the right to question His authority or to say why or wherefore.

While certain institutions are guaranteed infallibility and freedom from error (Persian, *khatá*; lit. misstep) or sin, 'Abdu'l-Bahá apparently encourages the pursuit of this condition of infallibility, or sinlessness, by everyone. In His Will and Testament (14) He said that the Universal House of Justice was "the source of all good and freed from all error ...." Similarly, in a prayer (Bahá'í Prayers, U.S. edition 36-37), 'Abdu'l-Bahá asks that "this youth" may be "freed from error." Once again, in *Some Answered Questions* (121), He said:

The position of Christ was that of absolute perfection; He made His divine perfections shine like the sun upon all believing souls, and the bounties of the light shone and radiated in the reality of men. This is why He says: "I am the bread which descended from heaven; whosoever shall eat of this bread will not die"--that is to say, that whosoever shall partake of this divine food will attain unto eternal life: that is, every one who partakes of this bounty and receives these perfections will find eternal life, will obtain preexistent favors, will be freed from the darkness of error, and will be illuminated by the light of His guidance.

On the Internet, Susan Maneck pointed out in a posting to the Bahá'í Usenet newsgroup (forum), *soc.religion.bahai* (1999), that Bahá'u'lláh, in this passage, defined infallibility as "sinlessness." The word translated

infallibility, she wrote, is ma'súm, which connotes "moral immaculacy." (The various words implying infallibility generally mean sinlessness, chastity, overflowing protection, and protection from error or missteps.) By juxtaposing terms, such as "Light" and "darkness" and "truth" and "error," Bahá'u'lláh appears to be clearly referring to human ethical duality, i.e., perfections or virtues in contrast to imperfections or faults.

In one of His table talks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained how sinlessness means perfection, whereas sin refers to imperfection, human error, and the existence of faults (Some Answered Questions 118-135):

Know that there are two natures in man: the physical nature and the spiritual nature. The physical nature is inherited from Adam, and the spiritual nature is inherited from the Reality of the Word of God, which is the spirituality of Christ. The physical nature is born of Adam, but the spiritual nature is born from the bounty of the Holy Spirit. The first is the source of all imperfection; the second is the source of all perfection....

This physical world of man is subject to the power of the lusts, and sin is the consequence of this power of the lusts, for it is not subject to the laws of justice and holiness....

... all the imperfections which come from the requirements of the physical life of man are transformed into human perfections by the teachings and education of that spirit....

... it [Original Sin] means that all men, even the Prophets and the Messengers of God, without committing any sin or fault, but simply because they are the posterity of Adam, have become without reason guilty sinners, and until the day of the sacrifice of Christ were held captive in hell in painful torment. This is far from the justice of God. If Adam was a sinner, what is the sin of Abraham? What is the fault of Isaac, or of Joseph? Of what is Moses guilty? It would appear then that infallibility (sinlessness or moral error) could be defined as perfection. To the degree to which a particular individual or institution lacks sin, or possesses those perfections or virtues which characterize the spiritual world, they may, perhaps, be regarded as infallible. Although ordinary humans, to the extent to which they are conformed to the spiritual condition, may have a limited "infallibility," or an absence of sin, the Prophets and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are absolutely perfect, sinless, virtuous and infallible. In other words, They reflect, in Their inward beings, all the divine perfections. They are, among other things, omniscient and, potentially at least, have access to a realm of universal knowledge.

In considering the Twin Institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, their sinlessness, or infallibility, might be expressed in their guaranteed, and protected, moral faithfulness to the Bahá'í Covenant, as promised by its Centre, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in His Will and Testament. That is to say, in whatever actions are taken or messages written by the Universal House of Justice or by the Guardian, these institutions are both authoritative and protected from intentional moral trespass or sin.

After referring to 'Abdu'l-Bahà's Will, Shoghi Effendi (The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh 150) outlined the respective areas of infallibility of each of these institutions:

... the Guardian of the Faith has been made the Interpreter of the Word and that the Universal House of Justice has been invested with the function of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the teachings. The interpretation of the Guardian, functioning within his own sphere, is as authoritative and binding as the enactments of the International House of Justice, whose exclusive right and prerogative is to pronounce upon and deliver the final judgment on such laws and ordinances as Bahá'u'lláh has not expressly revealed.

In a similar vein, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained in the following talk (Some Answered Questions 171-174):

It is said in the holy verse: "There is no partner for Him Who is the Dayspring of Revelation in His Most Great Infallibility. He is, in truth, the exponent of 'God doeth whatsoever He willeth' in the kingdom of creation. Indeed the Almighty hath exclusively reserved this station for Himself and to none is given a share in this sublime and highly exalted distinction."

Know that infallibility is of two kinds: essential infallibility and acquired infallibility. In like manner there is essential knowledge and acquired knowledge; and so it is with other names and attributes. Essential infallibility is peculiar to the supreme Manifestation, for it is His essential requirement, and an essential requirement cannot be separated from the thing itself. The rays are the essential necessity of the sun and are inseparable from it. Knowledge is an essential necessity of God and is inseparable from Him. Power is an essential necessity of God and is inseparable from Him. If it could be separated from Him, He would not be God. If the rays could be separated from the sun, it would not be the sun. Therefore, if one imagines separation of the Most Great Infallibility from the supreme Manifestation, He would not be the supreme Manifestation, and He would lack the essential perfections.

But acquired infallibility is not a natural necessity; on the contrary, it is a ray of the bounty of infallibility which shines from the Sun of Reality upon hearts, and grants a share and portion of itself to souls. Although these souls have not essential infallibility, still they are under the protection of God--that is to say, God preserves them from error. Thus many of the holy beings who were not dawning-points of the Most Great Infallibility, were yet kept and preserved from error under the shadow of the protection and guardianship of God, for they were the mediators of grace between God and men. If God did not protect them from error, their error would cause believing souls to fall into error, and thus the foundation of the Religion of God would be overturned, which would not be fitting nor worthy of God.

To epitomize: essential infallibility belongs especially to the supreme Manifestations, and acquired infallibility is granted to every holy soul. For

instance, the Universal House of Justice, if it be established under the necessary conditions--with members elected from all the people--that House of Justice will be under the protection and the unerring guidance of God. If that House of Justice shall decide unanimously, or by a majority, upon any question not mentioned in the Book, that decision and command will be guarded from mistake. Now the members of the House of Justice have not, individually, essential infallibility; but the body of the House of Justice is under the protection and unerring guidance of God: this is called conferred infallibility.

Briefly, it is said that the "Dayspring of Revelation" is the manifestation of these words, "He doeth whatsoever He willeth"; this condition is peculiar to that Holy Being, and others have no share of this essential perfection. That is to say, that as the supreme Manifestations certainly possess essential infallibility, therefore whatever emanates from Them is identical with the truth, and conformable to reality. They are not under the shadow of the former laws. Whatever They say is the word of God, and whatever They perform is an upright action. No believer has any right to criticize; his condition must be one of absolute submission, for the Manifestation arises with perfect wisdom--so that whatever the supreme Manifestation says and does is absolute wisdom, and is in accordance with reality.

If some people do not understand the hidden secret of one of His commands and actions, they ought not to oppose it, for the supreme Manifestation does what He wishes. How often it has occurred, when an act has been performed by a wise, perfect, intelligent man, that others incapable of comprehending its wisdom have objected to it and been amazed that this wise man could say or do such a thing. This opposition comes from their ignorance, and the wisdom of the sage is pure and exempt from error. In the same way, the skilled doctor in treating the patient does what he wishes, and the patient has no right to object; whatever the doctor says and does is right; all ought to consider him the manifestation of these words, "He doeth whatsoever He willeth, and commandeth whatever He desireth." It is certain that the doctor will use some medicine contrary to the ideas of other people; now opposition is not permitted to those who have not the advantage of science and the medical art. No, in the name of God! on the contrary, all ought to be submissive and to perform whatever the skilled doctor says. Therefore, the skilled doctor does what he wishes, and the patients have no share in this right. The skill of the doctor must be first ascertained; but when the skill of the doctor is once established, he does what he wishes.

So also, when the head of the army is unrivaled in the art of war, in what he says and commands he does what he wishes. When the captain of a ship is proficient in the art of navigation, in whatever he says and commands he does what he wishes. And as the real educator is the Perfect Man, in whatever He says and commands He does what He wishes.

In short, the meaning of "He doeth whatsoever He willeth" is that if the Manifestation says something, or gives a command, or performs an action, and

believers do not understand its wisdom, they still ought not to oppose it by a single thought, seeking to know why He spoke so, or why He did such a thing. The other souls who are under the shadow of the supreme Manifestations are submissive to the commandments of the Law of God, and are not to deviate as much as a hairsbreadth from it; they must conform their acts and words to the Law of God. If they do deviate from it, they will be held responsible and reproved in the presence of God. It is certain that they have no share in the permission "He doeth whatsoever He willeth," for this condition is peculiar to the supreme Manifestations.

So Christ--may my spirit be sacrificed to Him!--was the manifestation of these words, "He doeth whatsoever He willeth," but the disciples were not partakers of this condition; for as they were under the shadow of Christ, they could not deviate from His command and will.

In the above passage, it states, "... acquired infallibility is granted to every holy soul." Holiness would appear to refer to virtuousness (or spirituality), and a holy soul might be one who has been granted ethical guidance, such as with respect to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reference to the steadfastness in the Will of God of the disciples of Christ. Yet nowhere in that talk is the term "holy soul" qualified as referring exclusively to any specific category of persons, including the Guardians or the men of Bahá (members of the Universal House of Justice) - when they are deliberating. It may, therefore, be a general statement about virtuous sanctity.

From another standpoint, I think that 'Abdu'l-Bahá might have been teaching His listeners that the purpose of the essential infallibility (perfection or sinlessness) of the Prophets is, in revealing the Word, His divine perfections and infallibility, to inspire Bahá'í in general to acquire virtues or perfections, i.e., acquired infallibility. As the Exemplar (and as Center of the Covenant), 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the model, indeed the embodiment, of acquired infallibility.

Although the Guardian and the House of Justice have been given, by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, rational-legal authority over certain areas of the acquired infallibility (perfection) which He Himself exemplified in a general fashion, the individual believer is also encouraged, by Him, to make "progress in perfections." In other words, like 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we acquire our sinlessness, our relative degrees of infallibility, from the divine Educator (Some Answered Questions 236-237):

The reason of the mission of the Prophets is to educate men, so that this piece of coal may become a diamond, and this fruitless tree may be engrafted and yield the sweetest, most delicious fruits. When man reaches the noblest state in the world of humanity, then he can make further progress in the conditions of perfection, but not in state; for such states are limited, but the divine perfections are endless.

The Prophet, from His Station of the Most Great Infallibility, becomes the standard for what, in accordance with God's purpose and direction, is moral or ethical; and Bahá'u'lláh's appointed successors, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi

Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, are guaranteed that, within certain defined parameters, they will never deviate from the ethical principles and purposes instituted by the divine Messenger.

The Prophet brings that Word, the divine moral Standard which is an essential element of His nature, and those with authoritative conferred infallibility conform to the Word. Moreover, since, presumably, only the Prophets, and perhaps 'Abdu'l-Bahá, are omniscient at will, the conferred infallibility of the Guardian and the House of Justice functions within the framework of whatever information is available.

In the following quotation from a letter, dated 22 August, 1977, written on behalf of the Universal House to an individual believer, is the following explanation of the infallibility of the Guardian:

Shoghi Effendi was asked several times during his ministry to define the sphere of his operation and his infallibility. The replies he gave and which were written on his behalf are most illuminating. He explains that he is not an infallible authority on subjects such as economics and science, nor does he go into technical matters since his infallibility is confined to "matters which are related strictly to the Cause." He further points out that "he is not, like the Prophet, omniscient at will," that his "infallibility covers interpretation of the revealed word and its application," and that he is also "infallible in the protection of the Faith."

Regarding the infallibility of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a letter dated 3 June, 1982, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to two individual believers, contains the following statement:

There is nothing in the Writings that would lead us to the conclusion that what Shoghi Effendi says about himself concerning statements on subjects not directly related to the Faith also applies to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Instead we have assertions which indicate that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's position in the Faith is one for which we find "no parallel" in past Dispensations. For example, Bahá'u'lláh, in addition to His reference to the Centre of His Covenant as the "Mystery of God", states that 'Abdu'l-Bahá should be regarded as God's "exalted Handiwork" and "a Word which God hath adorned with the ornament of His Own Self, and made it sovereign over the earth and all that there is therein..." And from Shoghi Effendi we have the incontrovertible statement that the Guardian of the Faith while "overshadowed" by the "protection" of Bahá'u'lláh and of the Báb, "remains essentially human", whereas in respect of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Shoghi Effendi categorically states that "in the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized."

By the same token, it may be unnecessary to assume, on the basis of the above, that references by the Prophet and by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to material and scientific subjects are always literal. Meaning, in other words, is not always synonymous with scriptural context or with literal truth. The fact that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have the authority to address scientific and historical subject matter ought not lead us to conclude that scriptural statements can always be

interpreted as scientific propositions.

Furthermore, it is doubtful that religious authority, even in cases where textual meaning has been interpreted by the Shoghi Effendi as scientific or historical, would ever take precedence over scientific authority. Naturalistic statements in the Sacred Text would perhaps have religious authority, in that they can inspire the believer to a more profound understanding of natural processes. However, scientific authority is another matter. Scientists base their conclusions on empirical observation, not on scriptural propositions.

In other words, different perspectives yield their own forms of data. We will attempt a resolution when our attention turns to evolution. However ambiguity is nothing to be alarmed about. Denying or minimizing differences, in a Procrustean effort to make things fit, does violence to both magisteria and is surely unnecessary. As the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice wrote to this writer (May 17, 1995):

With regard to the harmony of science and religion, the Writings of the Central Figures and the commentaries of the Guardian make abundantly clear that the task of humanity, including the Bahá'í community that serves as the "leaven" within it, is to create a global civilization which embodies both the spiritual and material dimensions of existence. The nature and scope of such a civilization are still beyond anything the present generation can conceive. The prosecution of this vast enterprise will depend on a progressive interaction between the truths and principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry. This entails living with ambiguities as a natural and inescapable feature of the process of exploring reality. It also requires us not to limit science to any particular school of thought or methodological approach postulated in the course of its development. The challenge facing Bahá'í thinkers is to provide responsible leadership in this endeavour, since it is they who have both the priceless insights of the Revelation and the advantages conferred by scientific investigation.

If certain arguments are not literal, perhaps an understanding could be obtained by cultivation a mystic knowingness or gnosis (Arabic, *irfán*). Since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretations of scripture may frequently have transcended the realms of rational discourse and materiality, revisioning them on a noumenal level might more closely approximate His intent.

As demonstrated through the hermeneutic circle (i.e., one's interpretations are limited by one's knowledge), should those less facile with ontic perception attempt a logical exegesis of Sacred Text, the results may be spurious. In other words, if scripture functions as a context for transformative experience, as a historically based matrix for a higher existential reality, then, as a prerequisite to logical understanding, the reader may first be obliged to connect with that reality.

In this connection, sociologist Erving Goffman (Studies in Ethnomethodology. Blackwell: 1985) argued that rules must always be considered in context. Thus, the researcher should be wary of imposing upon a situation an a priori

theoretical (explanatory) perspective. Rather, it is essential that she first consider the normative framework constructed by the participants themselves. In other words, if 'Abdu'l-Bahá's approach to logic is contextual, following His arguments may not be a matter of simply applying the principles of formal or symbolic logic. It may also be expedient that the reader understand some of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's overall spiritual design.

The condition of faith known as certitude implies that the individual, relative to her connectedness with the divine, acquires insight and virtue; while the quest for certainty (being absolutely convinced), seen perhaps in various conceptions of scriptural materialism, rests on the possibly erroneous notion that anything more than a probabilistic knowledge of existence can be attained by the human intellect. The first is a developmental process. The second minimizes the epistemological relativity of human experience.

Before moving on, a brief discussion of the relationship between authority and infallibility may be helpful. If, for a moment, infallibility is bracketed, or set aside, the numerous covenantal statements conferring authority upon the Prophets, upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and upon the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice remain. In other words, obedience is required irrespective of whether an individual or institution is infallible, all-knowing, or sinless.

Indeed, there appears to be a complementary relationship between authority, or the Bahá'í religious magisterium, and infallibility. While taking care to distinguish infallibility from scriptural materialism, which minimizes the importance of cultural and historical context and execrates most metaphorical understandings as spiritualizing, we might wish to appreciate the areas of authority which lie within the jurisdiction of a particular individual or institution, which for Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are universal and for the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice have been clearly enumerated, and to unabashedly acknowledge that whatever is said or done, with respect to that authority, is good, virtuous, or perfect, or, in other words, infallible. With respect to the Universal House of Justice, for instance, that virtuous perfection might become evident over time, rather than in one or two specific communications.

Perhaps, from another standpoint, infallibility, as the Logos (sinlessness and virtue), represents the knowing principle, and authority, the Will of God, expresses the principle of love. Together, they provide us with degrees of awareness of perfection. Moreover, these two principles, as corequisites to overcoming limitation through the consciousness of divine Unity, are analogized as valleys traversed by the spiritual seeker (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys* and *the Four Valleys* 5-17). Together, knowledge and love are said to underlie "the whole of creation." Bahá'u'lláh addresses this theme in the following extract from one of His Tablets (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 65):

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer

upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him--a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation....

## The Case of Some Answered Questions

### Some Notes on Pedagogy

Regarding the status of Some Answered Questions in the Bahá'í canon, the following assertion is made in a letter, dated December 29, 1931, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the United States Publication Committee (Helen Hornby, compiler. *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. 1988):

Those talks of the Master that were later reviewed by Him, corrected or in some other form considered authentic by Himself, such as the 'Some Answered Questions', these could be considered as Tablets and therefore be given the necessary binding power. All the other talks such as are included in Ahmad's diary or the diary of pilgrims, do not fall under this category and could be considered only as interesting material to be taken for what they are worth. In the following excerpt from a letter, dated 3 June, 1982, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to two individual believers, is the statement:

In considering the whole field of divinely conferred "infallibility" one must be careful to avoid the literal understanding and petty-mindedness that has so often characterised discussions of this matter in the Christian world. The Manifestation of God (and, to a lesser degree, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi,) has to convey tremendous concepts covering the whole field of human life and activity to people whose present knowledge and degree of understanding are far below His. He must use the limited medium of human language against the limited and often erroneous background of His audience's traditional knowledge and current understanding to raise them to a wholly new level of awareness and behaviour. It is a human tendency, against which the Manifestation warns us, to measure His statements against the inaccurate standard of the acquired knowledge of mankind. We tend to take them and place them within one or other of the existing categories of human philosophy or science while, in reality, they transcend these and will, if properly understood, open new and vast horizons to our understanding.

Some sayings of the Prophet and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are clear and obvious. Among these are laws of behaviour. Others are elucidations which lead men from their present level of understanding to a new one. Others are pregnant allusions, the significance of which only becomes apparent as the knowledge and understanding of the reader grow. And all are integral parts of one great Revelation intended to raise mankind to a new level of its evolution.

It may well be that we shall find some statement is couched in terms familiar to the audience to which it was first addressed, but is strange now to us. For example, in answer to a question about Bahá'u'lláh's reference to the "Fourth

Heaven" in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, the Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf:

"Regarding the ascension of His Holiness Christ to the fourth heaven revealed in the Book of Certitude, Shoghi Effendi says that the phrase 'fourth heaven' is used to conform with the ancient astronomers' terms and theories which were upheld by the followers of the Shí'ih sect, and since the Book of Certitude was originally revealed for the guidance of that sect, the above phrase, therefore, was used in conformity with their theories."

(Translated from the Arabic)

In studying such statements, however, we must have the humility to appreciate the limitations of our own knowledge and outlook, and strive always to understand the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh in making them, trying to look upon Him with His own eyes, as it were.

The issue of whether a detailed knowledge of cultural, historical, and linguistic context is necessary or helpful in understanding scripture is a complex one. On the one hand, the absence of contextual knowledge can often permit one to approach the Sacred Texts with fewer preconceptions. Yet, on the other hand, possessing this sort of knowledge, provided one is sufficiently detached from it in order to see beyond it, can assist the reader to recognize many subtleties of meaning and to appreciate the process through which narratives are recontextualized and terms are redefined by the Writer.

'Abdul-Bahá's pedagogical method in *Some Answered Questions* was contextual and comparative. He repeatedly referred to what others said as a means of conveying His Own arguments. In so doing, He primarily used substantive (textual), rather than instrumental (formally logical), rationality.

This approach was not at all unusual in the Islámic world. Bahá'u'lláh appropriated it for Himself, as in *The Seven Valleys*, which, while outwardly is a retelling of Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, is inwardly a symbol vehicle for presenting, in literary form, teachings of His new Revelation.

This technique can also be found in *Some Answered Questions* when, among other things, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to ether, to the views of the philosophers, to evolution, and when He adopts Huxley's term, agnosticism, through perhaps somewhat closer to Albrecht Ritschl's views on the knowability of attributes and the unknowability of the divine Essence, as an analogy for the essential unknowability of God. Likewise, throughout Bahá'í scripture, the use of Neoplatonic, Irfáníyyih, Ishráqíyyih, Akbaríyyih, Sadra'iyyih, Peripatetic, (Aristotelian), and other modes of discourse are frequently adopted as cultural and historical context, or vehicle, for communicating spiritual realities.

Science investigates the names and attributes of God, the Adamic consciousness (Gen. 2:19-35), or an understanding of material existence, not essence (spirit) itself:

And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and

whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.

These names and attributes are, it seems, the indicants of essence and thus constitute the outward appearance of Divinity in the material world. It is through attribution, in words and language, that humans understand the Revelations of the Prophets. In other words, the Greater World, or Prophethood, is conceptualized in terms of the names and attributes, or reflection, of God in nature. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote (Tablet to August Forel 8), "The mind comprehendeth the abstract by the aid of the concrete ...."

Likewise, in *Some Answered Questions* (83-84), 'Abdu'l-Bahá's table talks with Laura Clifford Barney and her companions, He clearly explains His pedagogy. It what may have been an attempt at cautioning His listeners against interpreting His comments on evolution, and on various other subjects, as being literally valid, He said, in part:

A subject that is essential for the comprehension of the questions that we have mentioned, and of others of which we are about to speak, so that the essence of the problems may be understood [*italics added*], is this: that human knowledge is of two kinds. One is the knowledge of things perceptible to the senses--that is to say, things which the eye, or ear, or smell, or taste, or touch can perceive, which are called objective or sensible....

The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual-- that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses.... Even ethereal matter, the forces of which are said in physics to be heat, light, electricity and magnetism, is an intellectual reality, and is not sensible. In the same way, nature, also, in its essence is an intellectual reality and is not sensible; the human spirit is an intellectual, not sensible reality. In explaining these intellectual realities, one is obliged to express them by sensible figures because in exterior existence there is nothing that is not material. Therefore, to explain the reality of the spirit--its condition, its station--one is obliged to give explanations under the forms of sensible things because in the external world all that exists is sensible.

Regarding ether, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said (*Some Answered Questions* 189-190):

One more point remains. Modern philosophers say: "We have never seen the spirit in man, and in spite of our researches into the secrets of the human body, we do not perceive a spiritual power. How can we imagine a power which is not sensible?"...

If we wish to deny everything that is not sensible, then we must deny the realities which unquestionably exist. For example, ethereal matter is not sensible, though it has an undoubted existence. The power of attraction is not sensible, though it certainly exists. From what do we affirm these existences? From their signs. Thus this light is the vibration of that ethereal matter, and from this vibration we infer the existence of ether.

In a letter dated 3 June, 1982, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to two individual believers, it states:

With reference to your question about the "ether", the various definitions of this word as given in the Oxford English Dictionary all refer to a physical reality, for instance, "an element", "a substance", "a medium", all of which imply a physical and objective reality and, as you say, this was the concept posited by nineteenth century scientists to explain the propagation of light waves. It would have been understood in this sense by the audiences whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá was addressing. However, in Chapter XVI of "Some Answered Questions", 'Abdu'l-Bahá devotes a whole chapter to explaining the difference between things which are "perceptible to the senses" which He calls "objective or sensible", and realities of the "intellect" which have "no outward form and no place", and are "not perceptible to the senses". He gives examples of both "kinds" of "human knowledge". The first kind is obvious and does not need elaboration. To illustrate the second kind the examples He gives are: love, grief, happiness, the power of the intellect, the human spirit and "ethereal matter". (In the original Persian the word "ethereal" is the same as "etheric".) He states clearly that "Even ethereal matter, the forces of which are said in physics to be heat, light, electricity and magnetism, is an intellectual reality, and is not sensible." In other words, the "ether" is a concept arrived at intellectually to explain certain phenomena. In due course, when scientists failed to confirm the physical existence of the "ether" by delicate experiments, they constructed other intellectual concepts to explain the same phenomena.

In discussing ether, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminded His listeners that not everything which exists on the material plane can be observed, unaided, through the senses. It is doubtful He was affirming the existence of ethereal matter. In other words, just as scientists say (said) that ether exists, even though it cannot be directly seen, so intellectual realities, such as the rational soul, should not be rejected on the basis of their invisibility. Ether was an obvious choice as an example, since, by using it, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's audience would immediately understand His meaning.

Likewise, with His treatment of evolution in Some Answered Questions, it is unlikely that His primary purpose was to affirm or deny Darwinian evolution. Rather, by speaking analogically of biological origins, as they were understood in the early twentieth century, He adopted a sensible figure for the intellectual reality of man's spiritual Origin (God). Just as 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not instructing us to believe in ether, He was also not arguing for the adoption of the popular view of evolution common in the early 1900s. He was, for comparative purposes, only acknowledging that such and such is what scientists say is true.

In addition, in Some Answered Questions (212-216), 'Abdu'l-Bahá discusses man's innate (individuality or capacity), inherited (nature or biology), and acquired (nurture or socialization and education) character.

The main point of His argument appears to be that, regardless of one's innate qualities and inherited traits, progress and development are still possible through education. He wrote (214):

But the difference of the qualities with regard to culture is very great, for education has great influence. Through education the ignorant become learned; the cowardly become valiant. Through cultivation the crooked branch becomes straight; the acid, bitter fruit of the mountains and woods becomes sweet and delicious; and the five-petaled flower becomes hundred petaled. Through education savage nations become civilized, and even the animals become domesticated. Education must be considered as most important, for as diseases in the world of bodies are extremely contagious, so, in the same way, qualities of spirit and heart are extremely contagious. Education has a universal influence, and the differences caused by it are very great.

Applying a similar method to the one He had used with evolution and ether, 'Abdu'l-Bahá borrowed a commonly accepted view of biological inheritance and the obvious differences in rational capacity which that view implies to teach His audience about the importance of education.

One additional example can be found in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretations of traditional Bible prophecies. As with the previous examples discussed, the essential meaning of His arguments may be less related to the actual content of the prophecies than to His creative use of the biblical narratives as vehicles for His Own discourse. Consequently, approaches to teaching Bahá'í doctrines which reify 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophetic hermeneutics, or which reduce His presentations to a form of biblical or Bahá'í apologetics, may be missing His central point.

#### Evolution and Emanation

In the following excerpt, Shoghi Effendi, through his secretary, appears to say that 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirmed evolution. However, a more careful examination may reveal something quite different.

The Bahá'í Faith teaches man was always potentially man, even when passing through lower stages of evolution. Because he has more powers, and subtler powers than the animal, when he turns towards evil he becomes more vicious than an animal because of these very powers.

- From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, October 4, 1950; cited: Lights of Guidance, no.1341

The phrasing of the above quotation is significant. Notice the main message, which is that "man was always potentially man." Then, as if to make a side comment, He says, "even when passing through lower stages of evolution." As 'Abdu'l-Bahá had done with ether and evolution, the Guardian, although appearing to acknowledge evolution, was, in reality, affirming the principle of the harmony of science and religion and setting, thereby, a precedent for how Bahá'ís, in general, should regard the station of science and its relationship with religion.

Apparently, some Bahá'ís have understood 'Abdu'l-Bahá's comments as an

endorsement of what has sometimes been called "parallel evolution," a theological position, not to be confused with its technical scientific usage in physical anthropology and evolutionary biology, which denies hominid (human) macroevolution, while affirming microevolution. (Macroevolution is inter-species evolution; while microevolution is intra-species evolution.) The claim is that, while, during the course of his microevolution, man may have resembled lower life forms, he was always man. Genetic connections between human and other animal lines are dismissed.

Parallel evolution, in popular Bahá'í usage, resembles scientific creationism or creation science. Like creation science, parallel evolution acknowledges microevolution but, to varying degrees, reject macroevolution. Additionally, supporters of both perspectives have invoked the "evidence from design" argument to explain similarities between the supposedly distinct lines of biological development.

Among the differences between creation science, as viewed by some evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, and parallel evolution is, first, that the latter acknowledges a wider range of transitional microevolutionary forms. (Many Christian microevolutionists point to the absence of transitional fossil evidence to support their position.) Second, parallel evolutionists, unlike some, but not all, Christian creationists, do not typically insist on a young earth. Third, parallel evolutionists frequently acknowledge macroevolution except when it comes to man.

The subject of biological origins apparently lies within the authorized realm of science. Thus, even if 'Abdu'l-Bahá was promoting something like parallel evolution, His views might have religious, but probably not scientific, authority. Furthermore, it is obviously unrealistic, and probably impudent, to expect that contradictions, an inevitable result of the limitations of language and material metaphor, would be resolved all at once. In the Bahá'í paradigm for the harmony of science and religion, the purview of the former would, it seems, pertain to material matters, while the authority of the latter relates properly to questions of ethics, teleology, and spiritual ontology.

Being religious leaders, the primary concern of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi was apparently that the religion they headed did not fall victim to superstition. Support for the scientific method was, it seems, more important to them than whether a particular scientific finding would, like ether, change at some point in time.

The Bahá'í teachings appear to advocate the relative acceptance of what scientists say about evolution (or anything else), including the apparently shared ancestry between various primates, not because 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirmed it or not, but because of the station which has been given to science in the Bahá'í teachings; and one of the functions of science is to guard religion from succumbing to superstition.

In His apparent treatment of evolution, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is affirming the magisterial (authoritative) differences between science and religion. On the

one hand, He states that evolution is a matter for scientists. On the other hand, he asserts the essential distinction of the human species from the animals, i.e., the possession of a rational soul (a.k.a. human spirit, rational faculty, and common faculty).

'Abdu'l-Bahá uses evolution as a "thought bridge" to an understanding of the human reality which underlies outward appearances. Moreover, the context for 'Abdu'l-Baha's illustration was evolution as understood in the early 20th century. Today, the issues are different. Dawkins (the "selfish gene") and Gould ("punctuated equilibrium") are two of the major players, and most experts say that Dawkins has the upper hand. These are, and really always have been, scientific, not religious, issues.

### The Missing Link and the Great Chain of Being

'Abdu'l-Bahá and, more indirectly, Shoghi Effendi's secretary may have referred to two species: the animal and the human. 'Abdu'l-Bahá distinguishes them from one another, not on the basis that they share no biological evolutionary history, but because the animal does not share in the spiritual nature and rational soul of the human "species."

An urban legend, which has grown up around "Darwinian" evolutionism, centers around the supposed search for the missing link. This concept has at least two sources, and only one of them has any direct relation to evolution.

First, it was a part of popular darwinism (small "d"), not Darwinism itself. For various reasons, many people believed, incorrectly, that Darwin discussed the existence of a missing link as an intermediary creature between humans and other primates. Moreover, since 'Abdu'l-Bahá was addressing a general audience, not one consisting primarily of specialists, that is precisely the sort of Darwinism they would likely have been familiar with.

Second, the missing links concept, with a different meaning than what is usually understood, conflicts with the Neoplatonic concept of "the Great Chain of Being." According to this system (called "emanationism"), all creatures were ranked from higher to lower, with man situated at the top. Above man were various angelic beings and, ultimately, God. As Arthur O. Lovejoy points out (*The Great Chain of Being*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1936 and 1964. 255), the assumption was that while one species (conceived of in a Platonic or an Aristotelian sense) could never "evolve" into another one, the greatness of God would lead one to conclude that all possible varieties of creatures must exist. Any gaps in the chain would imply a lack of perfection and comprehensiveness in God's creation and were, therefore, inconceivable. Ergo, there could be no missing link.

In other words, according to the Neoplatonic "Great Chain of Being," no species (something like spirit - not species as Darwin used it) could come from another species, since all of them emanated from the "One" (God). Any consideration of evolution and the passage of time was irrelevant. More importantly, there could be no gaps in existence, since God's creation conformed perfectly to His

intentionality.

If one wishes to interpret 'Abdu'l-Bahá's comments as arguing, literally, against the missing link concept, His words do not appear to have stood the test of time. Many missing links have, to this date, been found. However, One of the underlying structures of Some Answered Questions has 'Abdu'l-Bahá referring to what others have said as a way of establishing His Own points. His references to the missing link could be regarded as illustrations, rather than as literal statements of scientific truth, and refuting a popular view of evolutionary development may have been alien to His intent.

In the following excerpt from one of His table talks (Some Answered Questions 178-179), 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes His concept of "the Great Chain of Being":

... all these endless beings which inhabit the world, whether man, animal, vegetable, mineral--whatever they may be--are surely, each one of them, composed of elements. There is no doubt that this perfection which is in all beings is caused by the creation of God from the composing elements, by their appropriate mingling and proportionate quantities, the mode of their composition, and the influence of other beings. For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings. It is confirmed through evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association.

Once again (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 48):

It is obvious that all created things are connected one to another by a linkage complete and perfect, even, for example, as are the members of the human body.

In a seemingly unrelated passage, Bahá'u'lláh wrote (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh 74-75):

Contemplate with thine inward eye the chain of successive Revelations that hath linked the Manifestation of Adam with that of the Báb. I testify before God that each one of these Manifestations hath been sent down through the operation of the Divine Will and Purpose, that each hath been the bearer of a specific Message, that each hath been entrusted with a divinely-revealed Book and been commissioned to unravel the mysteries of a mighty Tablet. The measure of the Revelation with which every one of them hath been identified had been definitely fore-ordained. This, verily, is a token of Our favor unto them, if ye be of those that comprehend this truth.... And when this process of \*\*\*\*progressive Revelation\*\*\*\* [emphasis added] culminated in the stage at which His peerless, His most sacred, and exalted Countenance was to be unveiled to men's eyes, He chose to hide His own Self behind a thousand veils, lest profane and mortal eyes discover His glory.

Perhaps most interesting is the use of the term "chain," which may be an allusion to its usage in the Great Chain of Being. If so, "progressive" may not have as much to do with triumph and linear change as with the divine ordering of virtues, or spiritual perfections, a spiritual Kosmology, using Ken Wilber's

spelling (Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution. Boston: Shambhala. 1995.) and the changes required in the world of human affairs for expressing these divine perfections.

The absence of the supposed biological missing link was a parable for the inconceivability of a missing link in the Great Chain of Being which, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's system, would imply the incompleteness of creation. As Adam had, metaphorically, invested all created things with their names and attributes (Gen. 2:19-35), should even one of these be eliminated, existence would not fully mirror the perfection of God's Kingdom.

Taken in context, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appears to have asserted the independence of the human spirit from the lower degrees of spirit (animal, vegetable, and mineral), rather than of the human body from the bodies of other primates. His reference to the uniqueness of the human species would apply to the human spirit, which, as He seems to have argued, did not evolve from out of the lower degrees of spirit.

Actually, the reverse may nearly be true: Lower degrees of spirit emanate continually from the human spirit or rational soul. It is the human spirit that contains, or is the origin of, all the lower degrees of spirit. On the other hand, the lower degrees of spirit do not produce the human spirit. It might be more accurate to say that these lower degrees are the stepped-down energies of the human spirit, which contains them all.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's apparent discussion of evolution was a contextual vehicle for the involution of successively stepped-down degrees of spirit (human, animal, vegetable, and mineral) into matter. His perspective was, therefore, more Neoplatonic than Darwinian.

Although ostensibly discussing, possibly affirming, evolution, 'Abdu'l-Bahá may have been giving a discourse on teleology and the perfection of creation. While both evolution and emanation concern species origins, the first is Darwinian and the second Neoplatonic. In Darwinism, the origin of species is natural selection or what Spencer called "the survival of the fittest." In Neoplatonic emanationism, their Origin is God.

All the while referring to evolution, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's concern appears to be with its teleology, or purpose, rather than with its physical process. Evolution takes place, in His system, in order that the emanation of the names and attributes of God, which is the purpose or divine intentionality of evolution, can be more perfectly expressed in the kingdoms of creation. Likewise, as evolution is systematically transformed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá into a metaphor for divine emanation, so Neoplatonic emanationism becomes an allegory for the instrumental rationality of creation, i.e., its divine Origin and consequent perfection.

Matter and Form

'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote (Some Answered Questions 181):

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning - for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized....

We can consider a couple of possibilities:

If the above passage is taken literally, it lends further credence to the idea that 'Abdu'l-Bahá never denied the existence of a genetic or biological connection between humans and other animals. However, it is doubtful that the passage has much to do with the "missing link," per se.

It is more likely that 'Abdu'l-Bahá used Aristotelian terminology (as He frequently did in His table talks with Laura Clifford Barney) to examine the dualism of matter and form. Both are mentioned in the above passage, are solidly rooted in Aristotle's physics/metaphysics, and are applied by him to both animate and inanimate objects.

First, although it is, perhaps, debatable whether Aristotle himself promoted the idea, certain perspectives which derived from Peripatetic thought postulated the existence of a "prime matter." It was argued that this matter possesses no structure of its own, that it underlies all species changes, and that all things come into existence from it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá may have had this concept in mind when He spoke of the original oneness of matter.

Second, the form of something (also mentioned in the above passage) is somewhat analogous to its structure. However, to Aristotle, this formative structure is dynamic, not static, i.e., it remains with the entity throughout its life course (or existence). Likewise, in the above extract from Some Answered Questions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appears to believe that the forms themselves were produced from this prime matter.

Perhaps 'Abdu'l-Bahá is making one analogy between "prime matter" and "spirit" and another between "forms" and "degrees of spirit" (mineral, vegetable, etc.). Elsewhere in Some Answered Questions, He may have used "species" as a metaphor for degrees of spirit. In other words, what 'Abdu'l-Bahá could be saying is that the various degrees of spirit are either manifested by or emanated from the Most Great Spirit (the Spirit of God).

Unless one's consciousness is elevated to the celestial Kingdom revealed by the Prophet, the realm of divine virtues, one's spiritual comprehension will likely remain mundane and superficial. Text, as words, will never rise to the level of Text, as vehicle, for exegesis is as much existential as it is empirical.

The Gospel According to Nabíl

Shoghi Effendi could have selected another history of the Bábí Dispensation and the early Bahá'í Dispensations to translate. In a sense, that volume, irrespective of its historical accuracy, is almost like a new gospel, "The

Gospel According to Nabil." There are numerous parallels within it to the life, passion, and Crucifixion of Christ, correspondences alluded to by the Guardian (God Passes By 56-57):

The passion of Jesus Christ, and indeed His whole public ministry, alone offer a parallel to the Mission and death of the Báb, a parallel which no student of comparative religion can fail to perceive or ignore. In the youthfulness and meekness of the Inaugurator of the Bábí Dispensation; in the extreme brevity and turbulence of His public ministry; in the dramatic swiftness with which that ministry moved towards its climax; in the apostolic order which He instituted, and the primacy which He conferred on one of its members; in the boldness of His challenge to the time-honored conventions, rites and laws which had been woven into the fabric of the religion He Himself had been born into; in the role which an officially recognized and firmly entrenched religious hierarchy played as chief instigator of the outrages which He was made to suffer; in the indignities heaped upon Him; in the suddenness of His arrest; in the interrogation to which He was subjected; in the derision poured, and the scourging inflicted, upon Him; in the public affront He sustained; and, finally, in His ignominious suspension before the gaze of a hostile multitude--in all these we cannot fail to discern a remarkable similarity to the distinguishing features of the career of Jesus Christ.

It should be remembered, however, that apart from the miracle associated with the Báb's execution, He, unlike the Founder of the Christian religion, is not only to be regarded as the independent Author of a divinely revealed Dispensation, but must also be recognized as the Herald of a new Era and the Inaugurator of a great universal prophetic cycle. Nor should the important fact be overlooked that, whereas the chief adversaries of Jesus Christ, in His lifetime, were the Jewish rabbis and their associates, the forces arrayed against the Báb represented the combined civil and ecclesiastical powers of Persia, which, from the moment of His declaration to the hour of His death, persisted, unitedly and by every means at their disposal, in conspiring against the upholders and in vilifying the tenets of His Revelation.

Perhaps it was these similarities in construction, content, and symbology to the Gospels of the New Testament, not so much its role as a literal history of that period, which inspired Shoghi Effendi to select Nabil's Narrative as his primary contribution to the mystical history of the Bábí and Bahá'í dawn-breakers. In Nabil's "gospel," the resurrection of the Bab is actually accomplished through the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh.

The essential hermeneutic error of Christian fundamentalism is to reduce the Bible to history and observable fact. Thus, the Resurrection of Christ, the Edenic account, and the story of Jonah in the belly of the whale are interpreted as actual historical events, as if they had been reported to us by a journalist. While *The Dawn-Breakers* is not scripture, though it may contain more first-hand information than any of the four Gospels, readers may commit a comparable error, that of conflating vehicle with meaning, if they assume the reason the why the Guardian translated the first part of Nabil's Narrative was

to promote its value as literal history.

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