

Choice Wine: The Kitab-i Aqdas and the Development of

Exported from Holy-Writings.com on 2026-06-19 — 1 clipping

Preface

First, I should begin by confessing that I speak neither Persian nor Arabic, and so this paper is not intended as a scholarly analysis of the Kitab-i Aqdas or its laws, which I am certainly not qualified to undertake. Rather, I am proposing a "theory of the Kitab-i Aqdas," so to speak--a tentative conceptual framework within which we can understand the Most Holy Book and the role that it is intended to play in the Bahá'í religion.

In particular, I wish to investigate the attitude which the Book takes toward Bahá'í law by looking at the historical development of the text itself, as well as a few of the central laws which were promulgated by that text. My intention is to demonstrate that the Kitab-i Aqdas was not intended to establish a new law code (shari'a) similar to the one known to nineteenth-century Muslim jurisprudence, but rather to discard that approach to law in favor of a more organic promulgation of ethical principles.¹

Choice Wine

Near the beginning of the Kitab-i Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh issues this warning: Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power. To this beareth witness that which the Pen of Revelation hath revealed. Meditate upon this, O men of insight! (K5)

The metaphor that he chooses here is extremely instructive. Bahá'u'lláh's reference to a "mere code of laws" is most certainly an allusion to the shari'a, the holy law of Islam which is the basis of orthodox faith and practice. With astonishing brevity, Bahá'u'lláh appears to dismiss this ancient and hoary tradition out of hand. Instead, he explains, he has unsealed the "choice Wine."

Wine is, of course, forbidden in Islam as it is in the Bahá'í Faith. In Islam it is a symbol of violation of God's law and, through Sufi usage, also a symbol of mystical communion with God--spiritual intoxication--before which the law is at best irrelevant. That such a statement should preface Bahá'u'lláh's own Book of Laws is indeed astonishing. But, it appears to me to presage his attitude toward law throughout the book.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that very often Bahá'ís--and especially Bahá'ís

from Muslim societies--have very naturally understood the Kitab-i Aqdas to be a simple update of the Muslim code of laws, modernized and sanitized for contemporary consumption. In this view, we have a Bahá'í shari'a which is to

last for a thousand years. I believe that is a mistaken assumption which

cannot withstand careful inquiry, and which could not withstand the challenges of modernity--and now post-modernity.

The Revelation of the Kitab-i Aqdas

Almost nothing has been written in English about the manner in which the Kitab-i Aqdas was produced by Bahá'u'lláh. However, it is suggested by internal evidence and the little that is known of the history of the book's revelation that the Kitab-i Aqdas consists of an initial Tablet of laws which was supplemented over time with verses written in response to questions put to Bahá'u'lláh over a period of three or four years.

Ekbal has noted that Fadil-i Mazandarani's scholarship suggests that Bahá'u'lláh had begun to reveal some parts of the Kitab-i Aqdas from the first years of his arrival in 'Akka (1868), or perhaps even during his last year in Edirne.² It would appear that, after the initial composition, the Aqdas was increased in response to letters and petitions from the believers which put questions to Bahá'u'lláh which required answers. In verse 98 of the Aqdas, he explains:

Various petitions have come before Our throne from the believers, concerning the laws of God, the Lord of the seen and the unseen, the Lord of all worlds. We have, in consequence, revealed this Holy Tablet and arrayed it with the mantle of His Law that haply the people may keep the commandments of their Lord. Similar requests had been made of Us over several previous years, but We had, in Our wisdom, withheld Our Pen until, in recent days, letters arrived from a number of the friends, and We have therefore responded, through the power of truth, with that which shall quicken the hearts of men.³

Walbridge⁴ has suggested that the initial passages of the Kitab-i Aqdas come to an end around verse 17, which begins: "These are the ordinances of God that have been set down in the Books and Tablets by His Most Exalted Pen."⁵ And while that verse does present a natural break in the text, it appears to me that the book remains integrated and coherent, at least as a compilation of laws, until Bahá'u'lláh completes his apostrophes to various lands and peoples around verse 96. After that, the discussion becomes quite choppy and random, and appears to consist of answers to various questions, revealed in no particular order.

Of course, both of these positions remain mere speculation. The history of the revelation of the Kitab-i Aqdas has yet to be written. But, it is virtually certain that it could easily be written by consulting the original text of the book and the documents which are associated with it. Naturally, this would have to be done in the original language and by inspection of the documents at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa.⁶

By 1873, the text of the Aqdas was substantially complete and copies were circulated in Iran. However, the last verse of the modern text, verse 190 (the second prohibition on the use of opium⁷), was not revealed along with the rest of the book. Indeed, this last verse was not added to the text until 1890, when Mirza Muhammad-'Ali arranged for the first printing of the Kitab-i Aqdas in Bombay. Earlier (hand-copied) versions of the Aqdas which had circulated in Iran did not include this final verse.⁸

Beyond this addition of a final verse, however, the Aqdas continued to be amended and supplemented by Bahá'u'lláh in the Questions and Answers, which is virtually an integral part of the Most Holy Book itself. Indeed, a reading of Bahá'u'lláh's answers (without the questions) gives the same feel as a reading of the latter parts of the Aqdas itself. It seems to be that the Holy Book itself was compiled in the same method as were the Questions and Answers, except that in the text of the Aqdas, we are not given the questions!

It seems to me, that in Muslim context, with those involved being familiar with the Qur'an and the manner of its revelation, this development of the Aqdas would have seemed perfectly normal. After all, the Qur'an is not a continuous narrative, exhibits no organization, and was simply revealed by the Prophet as the occasion demanded. For Bahá'u'lláh, and for the early believers, it probably seemed appropriate that the Mother Book of the Bahá'í revelation would also be revealed in short pieces over years, and that it would develop as a compilation of holy verses.

In any case, Bahá'u'lláh continued to expand and supplement the Kitab-i Aqdas after 1873, not only with the Questions and Answers, but with the revelation of other Tablets and supplementary texts bearing on Bahá'í law. In his Tablet of Splendors (Ishraqat), for example, the eighth Ishraq is explicitly made a part of the Aqdas:

This passage, now written by the Pen of Glory, is accounted as part of the Most Holy Book . . .⁹

Indeed, according to Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'u'lláh continued to elaborate, to elucidate, and to supplement the provisions of the Most Holy Book "until the last days of His earthly life."¹⁰ It would seem that, according to the Guardian, the Aqdas was never regarded by Bahá'u'lláh as fixed or complete.

Beyond this, of course, the laws of the Kitab-i Aqdas have continued to develop in an organic manner through the application and interpretation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and later, of Shoghi Effendi. Bahá'í laws continues to be modified and expanded through the present-day legislation of the Universal House of Justice.

The Uncreated Qur'an vs. the Dynamic Aqdas

It is a fundamental tenet of (at least Sunni) Islam that the Qur'an is "uncreated." That is, the doctrine insists that the Holy Book was not created by God, but has existed from all eternity (in Arabic) as a fixed and unchanging guide for human behavior. As such, the laws of the Qur'an are regarded as a rigid blueprint for human life. As a consequence, an elaborate and detailed system of Muslim law has developed which purports to provide a guide to human behavior in every possible situation.

On the contrary, it is the thesis of this paper that Bahá'u'lláh did not intend his Holy Book to be understood in this manner. Indeed, the laws of the Aqdas developed and changed even in Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime, and certainly afterward. Rather, it is my contention that Bahá'u'lláh intended by the revelation of the Aqdas to offer the "choice wine" of upright and ethical conduct embodied in general principles and examples of beneficial law. That Bahá'u'lláh himself regarded these laws as flexible can be demonstrated.

— Choice Wine: The Kitab-i Aqdas and the Development of Baha'i Law (Used by permission of the curator)