

Dei Verbum

A Bahá'í Perspective
on the Roman Catholic Dogmatic Constitution
on Divine Revelation

By Marco Oliveira

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How the Bahá'í Faith sees Christianity

"Verily, He (Jesus) said: 'Come ye after Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.' In this day, however, We say: 'Come ye after Me, that We may make you to become quickeners of mankind'" (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 91.)

I was born in Portugal, a country with a predominantly Catholic population. Most of my relatives and friends are Catholics; some are more conservative, others are more liberal; the strength of their Catholic identity depends on each person. Needless to say, ever since I became Bahá'í in 1984, I have been asked many of questions about the Bahá'í Faith.

After so many explanations and interesting conversations on religious issues, I believe it is time to explain the Bahá'í Faith by comparing it to the core beliefs of the Catholic Church. I expect such an explanation would make the Bahá'í Faith more understandable for a Catholic, and simultaneously, would also allow Bahá'ís from non-Catholic background to better understand the central beliefs of the Catholic Church.

The basis for this comparison will be *Dei Verbum* (meaning "Word of God" in Latin), a document published by the Catholic Church. *Dei Verbum* is one of the most important documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965); it is described as the "Roman Catholic Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation." Its intention was to explain the "authentic doctrine on divine revelation" and how it was transmitted throughout the history.

But before we begin our analysis of *Dei Verbum*, let me remind our readers how the Bahá'í Faith sees Christianity.

The Bahá'í Faith recognizes the divinity of Jesus Christ, the importance of His sacrifice and His influence in the history of humanity. Most Bahá'ís, when writing or talking about this issue, will most likely quote the following words of Baha'u'llah:

"Know thou that when the Son of Man yielded up His breath to God, the whole creation wept with a great weeping. By sacrificing Himself, however, a fresh capacity was infused into all created things. Its evidences, as witnessed in all the peoples of the earth, are now manifest before thee. The deepest wisdom which the sages have uttered, the profoundest learning which any mind hath unfolded, the arts which the ablest hands have produced, the influence exerted by the most potent of rulers, are but manifestations of the quickening power released by His transcendent, His all-pervasive and resplendent Spirit. We testify that when He came into the world, He shed the splendor of His glory upon all created things." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXXVI.)

Concerning the origins of Christianity, the Bahá'í beliefs have a striking similarity with the ones of the Catholic Church:

"As to the position of Christianity, let it be stated without any hesitation or equivocation that its divine origin is unconditionally acknowledged, that the Sonship and Divinity of Jesus Christ are fearlessly asserted, that the divine inspiration of the Gospel is fully recognized, that the reality of the mystery of the Immaculacy of the Virgin Mary is confessed, and the primacy of Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, is upheld and defended" (Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 109-110).

And how do Bahá'ís feel about the followers of Jesus Christ? An answer to this question can be found in an event that occurred during the life of Baha'u'llah. In 1868, He was living in exile in Edirne (Ottoman Empire) when the Sultan decided to exile Him together with His family and companions. Such decision disturbed the small group of exiles and also many people in the city. The following quote refers to that moment:

"The people surrounded the house, and Muslims and Christians wept over Us, and the voice of lamentation was upraised between earth and heaven by reason of what the hands of the oppressors had wrought. We perceived that the weeping of the people of the Son exceeded the weeping of others - a sign for such as ponder" – (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lords of the Hosts*, p. 146).

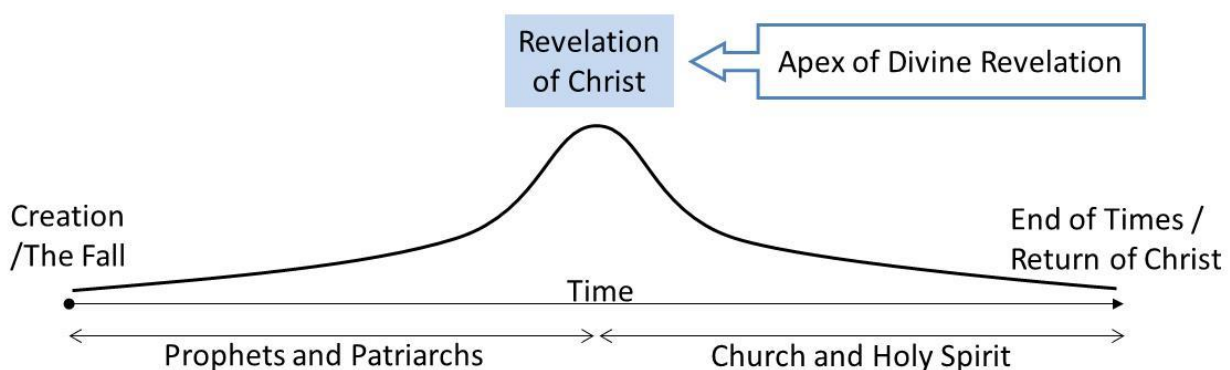
Divine Revelation

"That City is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus, the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, the Qur'an; in this day, the Bayan; and in the Dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest, His own Book." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXV).

How does God make Himself known? To whom does He reveal himself? And through whom? How can we know Him? These are the very first questions we have to answer when we try to explain any theistic system of thought. The first chapter of *Dei Verbum* (named "Revelation Itself") presents a Catholic answer to these questions. In short, it states the following:

- God revealed Himself and made His will known. This revelation occurred through actions and words in history, and reached its fullness with Jesus Christ. (#2)
- After the fall of Adam and Eve, God offered salvation to humanity, sending Abraham, the Patriarchs, Moses and then Jesus Christ ("the word made flesh"). (#3)
- The dispensation of Christ is considered a "new and definitive covenant" and the Church expects "no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ". (#4)
- God can be known through reason and revelation. (#7)

This is a Christocentric view of divine revelation. Jesus is seen as the apex of divine presence in history of Humankind; before Him, God revealed Himself through the prophets and patriarchs; after Him, there was the Church guided by the Holy Spirit. This chapter also reaffirms the myth of the fall as a justification for the concept of salvation, and claims that the revelation of Jesus was final. This view could be explained with the following image:



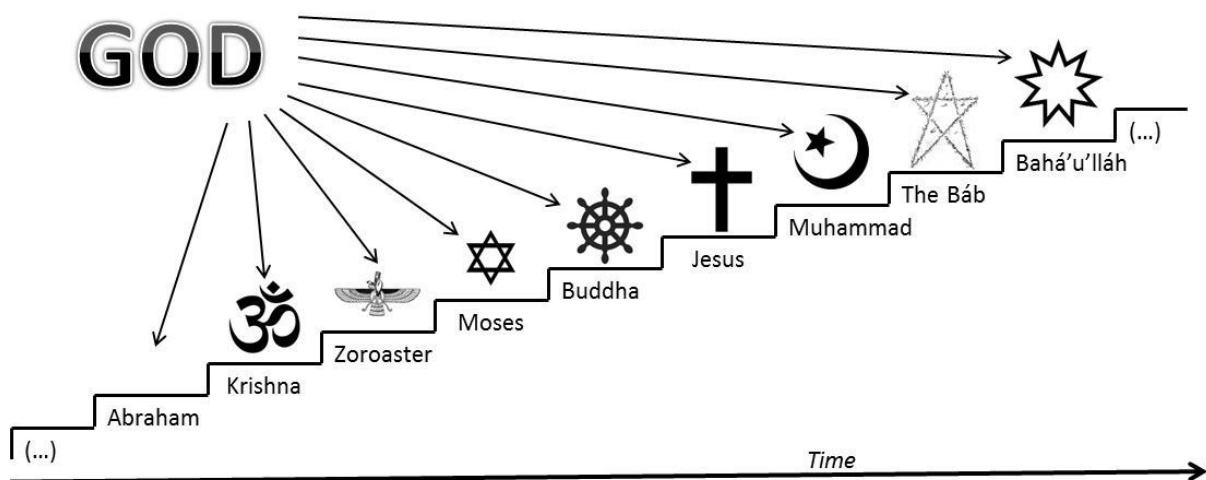
Basically, the Catholic Church claims finality (no more divine revelations after Jesus) and exclusivity (another document published by the Vatican II, named *Nostra Aetate*, referred to non-Christians religions and had a more inclusive perspective). Such a claim may have made some sense in homogeneous societies, where people practiced only one religion and had no contact with other realities. Thanks to migrations and

communications, we live today in pluralistic societies; it is very easy for us to get in contact with persons of other cultures and religions.

Therefore this Catholic claim raises several difficulties and contradictions:

- Why would God have a final or exclusive revelation?
- How is it possible to claim that an All-Loving Father loves all humanity, but saves only a minority?
- How is it possible that the Creator of all humanity reveals Himself only during a certain period of time, and only to a few people?
- How can we claim that God is a God of universal love and pretend that only one of His revelations is true?
- Could the leading figure in the history of humankind be only one people or only one religion?

In clear contrast with this view, the Bahá'í Faith states that religious truth is revealed by God progressively and cyclically over time through a series of divine Messengers, and their teachings are tailored to suit the needs of the time and place of their appearance. The notion of progressive revelation could be explained with the following schema:



Concerning the diversity of religion in the world, Bahá'u'lláh says:

"There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them,... were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXI).

An unbiased study of the lives of the Messengers of God - the Manifestations of God - will show that They have a lot in common:

- They appear in times of moral and spiritual decadence.
- Their appearance is not noticed.
- Their teachings call for a moral and spiritual reformation.
- They face opposition from the clergy and political power.
- They announced that another Manifestation would appear (or that they would return).
- They are persecuted and sometimes killed.
- Eventually their message prevails and is accepted.

Apostles and Tradition

"One's conduct must be like the conduct of Paul, and one's faith similar to that of Peter." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #189).

Every religion has its heroes and saints from the early days; they are privileged witnesses of the dawn of a new revelation. Their lives and sayings often become the core of the new religion.

The second chapter of *Dei Verbum* (named "Handing On Divine Revelation") focuses on the importance of the Apostles and their succession. In short, it states the following:

- The Apostles preached the Gospel. Their words and deeds conveyed the message of Christ. (#7)
- The Apostles left bishops as their successors, "handing over" to them "the authority to teach in their own place." (#7)
- This is the beginning of the "apostolic tradition," believed to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Several events in Catholic history are believed to be a proof of the validity of this tradition (#8).
- There is a strong link between sacred scripture and tradition. Both are accepted with the same "loyalty and reverence." (#9)
- Both scripture and Tradition are expressions of the divine Will. The task of the Church is to preserve, interpret and preach the teachings that exist in the sacred scriptures and tradition (#10).

In the Bahá'í Faith the Apostles of Christ are highly respected and admired. The Bahá'í authoritative texts stresses their spiritual importance, their influence and their unique role in the growth of the early Christian Church. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said:

"The Apostles were even as Letters, and Christ was the essence of the Word Itself; and the meaning of the Word, which is grace everlasting, cast a splendour on those Letters" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #29).

It is also relevant to notice that the Bahá'í sacred texts also describe the role of the Apostles after the crucifixion of Christ as the main actors in the true resurrection of Christ:

"After the martyrdom of Christ, the Apostles were perplexed and dismayed... The Cause of Christ was thus as a lifeless body. After three days the Apostles became firm and steadfast, arose to aid the Cause of Christ, resolved to promote the divine teachings and practise their Lord's admonitions, and endeavoured to serve Him... In other words, the Cause of Christ, which was like unto a lifeless body, was quickened to life and surrounded by the grace of the Holy Spirit." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, ch. 23:6).

According to the Bahá'í sacred texts, the Apostles also received the Holy Spirit:

"... the descent of the Holy Spirit means that the Apostles were attracted by the messianic Spirit, attained constancy and steadfastness, found a new life through the spirit of God's love, and saw Christ to be their ever-living helper and protector. They were mere drops and became the ocean; they were feeble gnats and became soaring eagles; they were all weakness and became endowed with strength." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, ch.24:4).

This second chapter of *Dei Verbum* claims that the apostolic tradition - known as a process of handing over doctrinal and spiritual authority - is an expression of divine Will and source of guidance. This is a topic where the Catholics and followers of every other religion diverge. For the Bahá'ís, the divine guidance comes from the person and the words of a divine Messenger. An additional source of guidance to the Bahá'ís comes from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and the messages from the Universal House of Justice.

We should have in mind that in the Catholic Church there is no such thing as a written covenant (as in the Bahá'í Faith). There is just a series of interpretations of the Bible and of history to claim the authority to the tradition. On the contrary, the succession of authority (to rule over the community of believers and to interpret the sacred writings) is clearly defined in the Bahá'í Faith (covenants of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Bahá).

"First concerning the statement of Jesus Christ "Thou art Peter and upon this rock...": this saying of Jesus establishes beyond any doubt the primacy of Peter and also the principle of succession, but is not explicit enough regarding the nature and functioning of the Church itself. The Catholics have read too much into that statement, and derived from it certain conclusions which are quite unjustifiable." (From a letter dated 7 September 1938 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, quoted in *Lights of Guidance* #1650).

And concerning traditions in general, 'Abdu'l-Bahá warned us:

"The Jews have traditional superstitions, the Buddhists and the Zoroastrians are not free from them, neither are the Christians! All religions have gradually become bound by tradition and dogma... We should, therefore, detach ourselves from the external forms and practices of religion. We must realize that these forms and practices, however beautiful, are but garments clothing the warm heart and the living limbs of Divine truth. We must abandon the prejudices of tradition if we would succeed in finding the truth at the core of all religions." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 135-136).

Sacred Scripture

"You must know the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 201).

All religions have their sacred writings. These may be words of their Prophet founder, testimonies of faiths, oral traditions or descriptions of the deeds of the first believers. The content of these Texts goes from proclamations of the divine message, counselling on moral issues, definition of social laws, to divinely inspired poetry and prophecies. Naturally, the followers of every religion believe their sacred writings have a special power, in that they can affect positively their personal and collective lives.

Dei Verbum focuses its 3rd chapter (named "Sacred Scripture, Its Inspiration and Divine Interpretation") on this topic. In short it says:

- Sacred scripture (Old and New Testaments) were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Their books teach divine truth faithfully and without error (#11).
- To understand the scriptures we should be aware of their diverse "literary forms." The circumstances and cultural environments where the books appeared should be taken in consideration (#12).
- Interpreting scripture should also take tradition into account and is subject to the judgment of the Church (#12).
- The Word of God is similar to human words, just like the Word of God once assumed the flesh of human weakness (#13).

Most people think of sacred scripture as a synonym for the "Word of God." But for the Bahá'í Faith the notion of the Word of God is not limited to the sacred scripture. The Gospel of John begins with the mysterious words "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Qur'an states that God created the universe with the word "Be" (2:117). Baha'u'llah makes similar statements and says that the Word of God is "the Cause of the entire creation," and has powers and features beyond our understanding:

"...the Word of God—exalted by His glory—is higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive, for it is sanctified from any property or substance. It transcendeth the limitations of known elements and is exalted above all the essential and recognized substances. It became manifest without any syllable or sound and is none but the Command of God which pervadeth all created things. It hath never been withheld from the world of being." (Baha'u'llah, Tablet of Wisdom, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 141).

According to the Bahá'í sacred writings, the Word of God is the first emanation from God. It always existed and will continue to exist. Everything was created through the Word. To understand the relation between God and His Word, the Bahá'í sacred texts often use the following analogy: God is like the sun and the

Word is like the sun's rays. These rays are reflected by the Manifestations of God, who, acting like mirrors, convey the Word to humankind. Therefore, Their words can be said to be the Word of God. Their written words are what we call "sacred writings".

For the Bahá'í Faith, the books of the Old and New Testaments are sacred writings, although they are not word-for-word the utterances and historical facts of the revelations they describe. In the Book of Certitude[¶93, ¶98], Bahá'u'lláh confirmed the spiritual authenticity of the Gospel texts.

In 1911, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in London, He visited and spoke at the City Temple. Before leaving the Church, He wrote in the old Bible used by generations of preachers, the following words:

"This book is the Holy Book of God, of celestial Inspiration. It is the Bible of Salvation, the Noble Gospel. It is the mystery of the Kingdom and its light. It is the Divine Bounty, the sign of the guidance of God." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdul-Bahá in London*, p. 18).

We wrote in a previous chapter that the Bahá'í Faith maintains that no religion has the exclusivity (or the finality) of the divine truth. Therefore, it should be clear that for Bahá'ís, the Bible is not the only existing sacred Book. There are other authentic scripture available to humankind, namely, the Qur'án and the Bahá'í sacred texts.

Concerning interpretations, it is normal that a religious authority claims to have the power to explain the meaning of their sacred writings. However, such power is questioned when another divine revelation appears and the new Manifestations of God explain the true meaning of the scriptures of past religions. One of such cases is described in the Bible when a twelve year old Jesus is found by His parents in the Temple explaining the meaning of the sacred writings to the scholars of His time (Luke 2:41-52).

Considering that for Bahá'ís there were other Divine revelations after Jesus Christ--namely, through Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh--it should not be a surprise to find in the Qur'án and in the Bahá'í authoritative texts explanations and interpretations of the Bible. Several Bahá'í books and tablets quote and explain various texts of the Bible, including Genesis, the Old Testament prophets, each of the gospels, several of the New Testament epistles and the Revelation of St. John.

The Old Testament

"At one time, Thou didst raise Him up, O my God, and didst attire Him with the ornament of the name of Him Who conversed with Thee (Moses), and didst through Him uncover all that Thy will had decreed and Thine irrevocable purpose ordained." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, XXXVIII).

Being born in a Jewish environment, and having its first believers coming from Jewish backgrounds, Christianity assumed the Jewish scriptures as part of their spiritual patrimony. These ancient texts were understood as a path leading to the revelation of Christ.

Dei Verbum focuses its 4th chapter (named "The Old Testament") on this topic. In short it says:

- God established a covenant with Abraham, renewed it with Moses and spoke through the prophets of Israel (#14).
- Thus, the Old Testament presents a plan of salvation that prepares humanity for the advent of Christ (#15).
- The books of the Old Testament "contain some things which are incomplete and temporary" but also display a "true divine pedagogy," including "sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers" (#15).
- The Old Testament is a preparation for the new covenant established by Christ, and its full meaning is exposed in the New Testament (#16).

For the Bahá'í Faith, every divine revelation has a preparatory message for the following revelation. The Old Testament is part of the process of continuous divine revelation. The prophets of Israel announced Christ and other Manifestations of God. In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the following prophets/persons of the Old Testament: Abel, Abraham, David, Joseph, Moses, Noah, and Pharaoh.

Concerning Abraham, Baha'u'llah revealed the following words:

"Later, the beauty of the countenance of the Friend of God appeared from behind the veil, and another standard of divine guidance was hoisted. He invited the people of the earth to the light of righteousness... It is well known what a host of enemies besieged Him, until at last the fires of envy and rebellion were kindled against Him. And after the episode of the fire came to pass, He, the lamp of God amongst men, was, as recorded in all books and chronicles, expelled from His city." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, ¶11).

Concerning Job, 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

"Reflect upon his holiness Job: What trials, calamities and perplexities did he not endure! But these tests were like unto the fire and his holiness Job was like unto pure gold. Assuredly gold is purified

by being submitted to the fire and if it contain any alloy or imperfection, it will disappear. That is the reason why violent tests become the cause of the everlasting glory of the righteous and are conducive to the destruction and disappearance of the unrighteous." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbás*, vol. 3, p. 655).

And concerning Moses, Baha'u'llah wrote:

"Armed with the rod of celestial dominion, adorned with the white hand of divine knowledge, and proceeding from the Párán of the love of God, and wielding the serpent of power and everlasting majesty, He [Moses] shone forth from the Sinai of light upon the world. He summoned all the peoples and kindreds of the earth to the kingdom of eternity.... Surely you are aware of the fierce opposition of Pharaoh and his people, and of the stones of idle fancy which the hands of infidels cast upon that blessed Tree. So much so that Pharaoh and his people finally arose and exerted their utmost endeavor to extinguish with the waters of falsehood and denial the fire of that sacred Tree..." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, ¶12).

In the Bahá'í authoritative texts we can find hundreds of quotes and allusions to Old Testament verses. However, we should keep in mind that the references to Old Testament stories, peoples and Prophets do not mean that the Bahá'í Faith believes these are historical facts or characters. But the spiritual meanings that these stories convey are truly important and are reaffirmed in the Bahá'í writings.

Jesus and the New Testament

"His Holiness Christ said: "The Father is in me." This we must understand through logical and scientific evidences, for if religious principles do not accord with science and reason, they do not inspire the heart with confidence and assurance.... Let us, free from past tradition, investigate the reality of this matter. What is the meaning of the father and the son?" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy*, pp. 151-152).

Jesus Christ is the central character of the New Testament; the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles and the Book of Revelation are centered in His life, His teachings, the deeds of the early apostles, and their understanding of His teachings. *Dei Verbum* focuses its 5th chapter (named "The New Testament") on this topic. In short it says:

- Christ was the "Word made Flesh." He "established the kingdom of God on earth," died, resurrected, and ascended to Heaven. (#17)
- The New Testament presents the Word of God in its "most excellent way" (#17). The Gospels have apostolic origin and preeminence in the New Testament (#18).
- The Church asserts unhesitatingly the "historical character" of the Gospels. The purpose of the authors of the Gospels was to tell us "honest truth about Jesus." They selected some things, summarized other things and explained others. (#19)
- The epistles and other New Testament writings were "composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit," describing "the beginnings of the Church" and its growth (#20).

According to the Bahá'í teachings, the New Testament is the Word of God; but that doesn't mean it is historically reliable. The books of the New Testament are testimonies of faith written by different people many years after the death of Christ; they refer to historical events, but cannot be said to be historical documents because they do not describe literally and exactly what happened. This topic was mentioned in a previous chapter.

Also in a previous chapter, we described the difference between God, His Word, and creation; we explained how His Messengers (including Christ) are like mirrors reflecting His word. That does not mean that the Word – or God – enters or incarnates in a Messenger. God is transcendent by definition; therefore, He cannot assume the form of a human being. If that would happen, He would no longer be God. God cannot incarnate; how could the Infinite become finite? Regarding this issue, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

"This fatherhood and sonship are allegorical and symbolical. The Messianic reality is like unto a mirror through which the sun of divinity has become resplendent. If this mirror expresses "The light is in me" – it is sincere in its claim; therefore Jesus was truthful when he said, "The Father is in me." The sun in the sky and the sun in the mirror are one, are they not? – and yet we see there are apparently two suns." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy*, pp. 151-152).

Because Jesus is the central character in the New Testament, it is suitable now to describe the Bahá'í view on several main Christological topics.

The Bahá'í sacred texts acknowledge the virginal birth of Christ. This belief, however, does not raise Jesus' divine condition above any other Messenger of God. Neither does it imply that Bahá'ís follow any Mariology cult. Shoghi Effendi clarified this topic:

"...regarding the birth of Jesus-Christ. In the light of what Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá have stated concerning this subject it is evident that Jesus came into this world through the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit, and that consequently His birth was quite miraculous. This is an established fact, and the friends need not feel at all surprised, as the belief in the possibility of miracles has never been rejected in the Teachings. Their importance, however, has been minimized." (Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 31 December 1937, quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 489).

The Bahá'í Faith does not deny the power of Manifestations of God to perform miracles, but tends to reinterpret accounts of miracles as metaphors, for spiritual miracles are more important than physical ones. Speaking of Jesus's miracles, Bahá'u'lláh states:

"...through Him [Jesus] the leper recovered from the leprosy of perversity and ignorance. Through Him, the unchaste and wayward were healed. Through His power, born of Almighty God, the eyes of the blind were opened, and the soul of the sinner sanctified. Leprosy may be interpreted as any veil that interveneth between man and the recognition of the Lord, his God. Whoso alloweth himself to be shut out from Him is indeed a leper." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXXVI).

The resurrection of Christ is a point of divergence between Bahá'ís and Christians. Christians believe in a physical resurrection—this is a core belief for them!—and Bahá'ís understand resurrection as symbolizing the resurrection of the early Church. This is explained in several passages in the Bahá'í authoritative texts. Shoghi Effendi wrote:

"We do not believe that there was a bodily resurrection after the crucifixion of Christ, but that there was a time after His ascension when His disciples perceived spiritually his true greatness and realized He was eternal in being. This is what has been reported symbolically in the New Testament and been misunderstood." (Shoghi Effendi, *High Endeavors: Messages to Alaska*, pp. 69-70).

Sacred Scripture

"...in the sayings of Him Who is the Spirit (Jesus) unnumbered significances lie concealed. Unto many things did He refer, but as He found none possessed of a hearing ear or a seeing eye He chose to conceal most of these things. Even as He saith: "But ye cannot bear them now." " (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, 148).

"The divine Words are not to be taken according to their outer sense. They are symbolical and contain realities of spiritual meaning. For instance, in the book of Solomon's songs you will read about the bride and bridegroom. It is evident that the physical bride and bridegroom are not intended. Obviously, these are symbols conveying a hidden and inner significance. In the same way the Revelations of St. John are not to be taken literally, but spiritually." ('Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 458).

Sacred scriptures have a pivotal importance for all world religions. They have the principles and the core teachings of each religion. For Christians, sacred scripture means only the Bible. *Dei Verbum* focuses its 6th chapter (named "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church") on this topic. In short it says:

- The Church considers the scriptures and the tradition as a "supreme rule of Faith." All preaching should be "nourished and regulated" by scripture. (#21)
- Christians should have access to the scriptures; therefore, "suitable and correct" translations are encouraged. (#22) Translations should have the necessary explanations for Christians and non-Christians. (#25)
- A deeper understanding of the scriptures is required. Exegetes and theologians, under the vigilance of the Church, should explain the meaning of the scriptures. (#23, #24)
- The clergy and lay people are urged to read the scriptures diligently and study them carefully, accompanied by prayer. (#25)
- Reading and studying of scripture will foster a stimulus in believer's spiritual life. (#26)

The Manifestations of God always explained the meaning of the sacred writings of previous religions to their followers. The meanings they presented were always different from current understanding amongst clergy and people. This is a natural part of the process of progressive revelation.

The New Testament presents us a story of the boy Jesus explaining the meaning of Hebrew scriptures to the doctors in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52). Later, the Christians began to understand the Old Testament in a different mode, found new meanings in those books, and shared them with the Jews and Gentiles. This was a motive for acceptance and rejection of the Message of Christ.

Today we have a similar situation with the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh and His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, revealed the meaning of various passages of the Qur'an and the Bible. In January 1861, Baha'u'llah was asked by an uncle of the Báb - the forerunner of Baha'u'llah - on the meaning of several passages of the sacred

writings. In reply, Baha'u'llah revealed the Book of Certitude (also known as The Kitáb-i-Íqán). This book is the second most important book of the Bahá'í sacred texts.

The Book of Certitude is a work of exegesis where Bahá'u'lláh rationally demonstrates the existence of figurative language in the Scriptures, based on absurdities that result from literal readings. He then presents several interpretations for symbolic descriptions and terms found in the New Testament and in the Qur'an. Parables, figurative speech, and apocalyptic visions are interpreted and given a new meaning.

To demonstrate the concept of progressive revelation, Bahá'u'lláh explains in the Book of Certitude the meaning of concepts like "resurrection," "return of a Prophet," "sovereignty," and "Seal of the Prophets." His exegesis exposes the consistency, coherence, and evolution of religion as a single process. The book rationalized the eschatology and established the doctrinal framework for the Bahá'í Faith. It also provided an eschatological bridge into a new religious worldview.

Referring to the Book of Certitude, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, wrote:

"Well may it be claimed that of all the books revealed by the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation, this Book alone, by sweeping away the age-long barriers that have so insurmountably separated the great religions of the world, has laid down a broad and unassailable foundation for the complete and permanent reconciliation of their followers." (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 139).

Some Answered Questions is a book that contains questions related to religion, philosophy and science, asked to `Abdu'l-Bahá by Laura Clifford Barney, during several of her visits to Haifa between 1904 and 1906, and `Abdu'l-Bahá's answers to these questions.

A considerable part of the book focuses on Christian subjects, namely, the story of Adam and Eve, the birth of Christ, the greatness of Christ, baptism, miracles, the Eucharist, Peter and the Papacy, the resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the second coming of Christ, the Day of Judgement, sin, and the Trinity.

More than good explanations of deep questions, the *Kitab-i-Íqán* and *Some Answered Questions* lead the reader to reflect about religious issues, explaining the seeming contradictions of the religious pluralism so visible in the world today, and avoiding dogmatic explanations, exclusivist views or syncretic attempts. No wonder these books are so popular amongst Bahá'ís and people wanting to study the Bahá'ís Faith.

A final remark on Christianity

"If a Christian sets aside traditional forms and blind imitation of ceremonials and investigates the reality of the gospels, he will discover that the foundation principles of the teachings of His Holiness Christ were mercy, love, fellowship, benevolence, altruism, the resplendence or radiance of divine bestowals, acquisition of the breaths of the Holy Spirit and oneness with God." ('Abdu'l-Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 105).

I was born in a Catholic family and accepted the Bahá'í Faith when I was 20 years old. Since I first encountered the Bahá'í Faith I always kept searching for links between the message of Baha'u'llah and the teachings of Christianity, particularly the Catholic Church. After all, most of my relatives are Catholics. After formally accepting the Bahá'í Faith I naturally kept following news and events from Christian churches.

The many references to Christian themes found in the Bahá'í Scriptures are an evidence of the strong links between the Christian and Bahá'í Faiths. Describing the spiritual station of Jesus, Mary, and Peter, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi, wrote:

"The Founder of the Christian Faith is designated by Bahá'u'lláh as the "Spirit of God," is proclaimed as the One Who "appeared out of the breath of the Holy Ghost," and is even extolled as the "Essence of the Spirit." His mother is described as "that veiled and immortal, that most beautiful, countenance," and the station of her Son eulogized as a "station which hath been exalted above the imaginings of all that dwell on earth," whilst Peter is recognized as one whom God has caused "the mysteries of wisdom and of utterance to flow out of his mouth." (Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 109-110).

But an honest dialogue between Bahá'ís and Christians can't be based only on similarities between these religions. We should also mention our differences; and as we have shown in this text, we have significant differences. It is my hope that these similarities and differences can be the subject for an inspiring and serene Bahá'í-Christian dialogue.

Besides the *Book of Certitude* and *Some Answered Questions* (mentioned in the previous chapter), other Bahá'í books contain noteworthy references to the situation of the Church and its future. In several letters addressed to the Bahá'ís between 1922 and 1929, Shoghi Effendi described the growth of the Bahá'í community and the successive world crisis as a process of collective maturation. It is worth noting the reference he makes to the internal crisis in the Church:

"...in later generations, voices were raised in protest against the self-appointed Authority which arrogated to itself privileges and powers which did not emanate from the clear text of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and which constituted a grave departure from the spirit which that Gospel did inculcate. They argued with force and justification that the canons promulgated by the Councils of the Church were not divinely-appointed laws, but were merely human devices which did not even

rest upon the actual utterances of Jesus. Their contention centered around the fact that the vague and inconclusive words, addressed by Christ to Peter, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church," could never justify the extreme measures, the elaborate ceremonials, the fettering creeds and dogmas, with which His successors have gradually burdened and obscured His Faith." (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 20).

It is also worth noting the reference to the external crisis in the Church:

"Such a conscious, avowed, organized attack against religion in general and Christianity in particular is something new in history. Equally deliberate in some lands in its determined hostility to Christianity is another form of social and political faith—nationalism. But the nationalist attack on Christianity, unlike Communism, is often bound up with some form of national religion—with Islám in Persia and Egypt, with Buddhism in Ceylon, while the struggle for communal rights in India is allied with a revival both of Hinduism and Islám." (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 182).

But in the midst of these crises, Shoghi Effendi also foresaw a promising future for Christianity:

"The indwelling Spirit of God which, in the Apostolic Age of the Church, animated its members, the pristine purity of its teachings, the primitive brilliancy of its light, will, no doubt, be reborn and revived as the inevitable consequence of this redefinition of its fundamental verities, and the clarification of its original purpose." (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 185).

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