

Reflections on the Study of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Personal and Social Transformation

By Colette M. Harrison, PhD

Introduction

In these critical times, it seems more important than ever to bring into alignment forces that promote personal transformation as well as those which promote social transformation.

For centuries people have turned to religion(s) seeking guidance for personal transformation. Social transformation, however, has never been as fully addressed in a cohesive manner in order to offer ways in which peoples of all backgrounds can more effectively work together for the good of our (hopefully) “ever-advancing civilization.” This lack of concrete guidance ended when the founder of the Bahá’í Faith, Bahá’u’lláh, brought new social teachings. They have been further expounded on through a series of carefully developed plans of action to be undertaken worldwide, now guided by the Bahá’í international council, the Universal House of Justice.

The key issues of our times to be addressed are not solely the concerns of the Bahá’í community—in fact, far from it! In many parts of the United States the “Third Reconstruction” movement—championed by Rev. Dr. William Barber and inspired by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—has put a spotlight on the self-same concerns that Bahá’u’lláh warned about more than 175 years ago, i.e. systemic racism, extreme economic disparities, the perpetuation of a war-based economy, increasingly severe environmental concerns, and a distorted moral narrative. Although the guiding principles are universal in nature and scope, they are left to each community to be implemented as their needs and exigencies dictate.

As the interfaith movement increasingly takes hold in many places, I have been able to participate in one such community—Dayton, Ohio—where I am pleased to say we have many active interfaith collaborations. One in particular that I intend to explore further here is how the

“Passage to Spiritual Maturity” discussion group can benefit from use of the teachings from Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas (the “Most Holy Book”) in creating the atmosphere that will help bring about the changes that can and will address the ongoing racism, “low-wealth” struggles, environmental challenges, and other challenges in redressing the moral narrative.

The group came about in July 2019, after two of us had been in a Bahá'í study circle focusing on the Ruhi series, Book 9.2, the theme of which is “the impact of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation on the collective life of humanity ... (and) the role our community has to play in advancing the stupendous civilization He has envisaged” (Ruhi Institute, 2015, p. 1). As a group, we felt that we wanted to share and explore this theme with a wider audience. We started a session at the public library using various Bahá'í resource materials and inviting participants from other faiths to bring in favorite writings and articles relevant to the theme of the week or month. We focused on five key issues that were relevant concerns in the community.

Connecting to the Aqdas

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas (along with the Bahá'í Writings as a whole) focuses on how personal transformation informs the transformation of society and brings about unity, both locally and globally.

I was struck by the depth of heart and felt a soul connection to the messages of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas when I read in an article by Roshan Danesh that “Bahá'u'lláh gradually unveils the significance of the new levels of knowledge and behavior to which the peoples of the world are being called. ... for such an understanding of unity to become a social ... reality ... refers to a shift in the worldview of individual human beings and social institutions” (Danesh, 2004, pp. 216 - 233).

The Bahá'í revelation identifies the oneness of humanity as the primary principle of this age. Yet, due to the forces of disintegration and social prejudices still very much at work, we find

that much hard work is necessary to achieve the basic human rights and core social justice needs of our age for our nascent global society to manifest the spirit of true unity. It all comes down, as Robert Atkinson points out repeatedly throughout his book, to *how we use our consciousness*, for unity—if it is to exist—must be a conscious choice (Atkinson, 2017). We must, therefore, address these needs through a variety of outwardly-focused initiatives and collaborations so that we connect with both like-minded individuals and organizations and with those still struggling to find a path that will bring about the peace and harmony they long for, even if they believe it is unattainable.

Through an in-depth exploration of the laws and ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas I believe it is possible to formulate sustainable plans of action that can be tailored to the needs and exigencies of the communities in which each of us live, while also demonstrating our interconnectedness to a wider whole.

The Baha’i Writings assert that the purpose of Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation is to bring about spiritual, moral, and social changes in the present system of human society so that the long-presaged stage of humanity’s maturity will come to fruition. As Behrooz Sabet pointed out in a recent article posted on BahaiTeachings.org: “One of the keys to understanding the Bahá’í worldview—and the process of human transformation in general—involves the concept of the approaching maturity of humanity” (Sabet, 2020).

What I find exciting is how the Bahá’í laws presented in the Aqdas can bring us to a new understanding of the potential civilization unfolding—which is only in its embryonic stage—and help us gain a greater appreciation and understanding of the laws’ purpose, wisdom, and intent. I have gained a new appreciation for the depth of wisdom offered in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, not only as a code of conduct but as a source of inspiration for the soul and something that binds the hearts. Looking at the Kitáb-i-Aqdas from this newfound perspective, I begin to have a better

understanding of how it serves to bring about the framework for a global society to emerge.

While it is clear that it is NOT for any of us to interpret the Word of God as set down by His Messengers and claim our view to be authoritative in any way (as explained in Note #130 at the end of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas), it doesn't mean we shouldn't discuss/deepen with each other on various passages in the Bahá'í Writings in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding and appreciation of their content—and perhaps discover perspectives we hadn't thought of before. Some of the new facet(s) may emerge through frank and honest dialogue as we ponder and investigate the truth!

My hope is that newfound understandings shaped by the exploration of the laws and ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas will help fuel these more elevated, more in-depth, spiritual conversations pertaining to the challenges we face in rebuilding and reshaping our community.

Of particular importance to me is my work with the greater Dayton Ethnic and Cultural Diversity Caucus on the needs of immigrants and refugees, and how to help local-born residents—members of the Interfaith Forum of Greater Dayton and participants of different faiths in the monthly Ladies Interfaith gathering, as well as a variety of community-based organizations—to learn to interface with each other and work more effectively together to assist the foreign-born in a variety of spheres (home, school, work, etc.).

A Code of Conduct

In my study of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, I am struck by its difference from the texts of earlier religious dispensations, which were fraught with admonitions. In contrast, we are invited to adopt a code of conduct where the ordinances stating what we *should* do outweigh those that tell us what we should not be doing. Perhaps a brief word is needed here on the differences between laws and ordinances. Laws are rules and guidelines that are set up to guide personal and collective behavior—basically things that “govern” what a person can and cannot do. They are

established to ensure that everyone is treated in the same way. Most ordinances deal with public safety, health and moral codes, and general welfare. Therefore, ordinances offer further instruction as to how—and what—we are to do in various areas of our lives. They are, therefore, at the heart of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation for the unification of humankind and the creation of a global society.

A wealth of precepts is offered not only as formal laws and ordinances within the text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas itself, but also in the Notes and in some of the Questions and Answers that follow the main text. Habib Riazati, in his 2003 study guide for the Wilmette Institute course on the Aqdas, has put together a masterful and comprehensive work that helps us search for those elements which can assist us with our personal and collective transformation. Among the key tenets espoused by Bahá'u'lláh is association with the followers of all religions:

Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God. Beware lest amidst men the flame of foolish ignorance overpower you.

All things proceed from God and unto Him they return. He is the source of all things and in Him all things are ended (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, para. 144).

Coupled with this are exhortations to provide service to mankind, for it is all well and good to talk about what needs to be done, but it is quite another thing to put these ideas into action. The primary thrust of our actions in Dayton has been to work with others in supporting and expanding on projects already in the planning stages. As a result, the community is benefiting from learning to use the process of consultation as well as the implementation of a number of virtues discussed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas which will be highlighted later on.

Our library discussion group's discussions about consultation have been amplified by these words of Rev. William Barber *adapted here as a composite interpretation from various pages from his book describing the "Third Reconstruction" movement*:

To stand together, *we have to learn to listen to one another and understand the pressures that weigh heavily on some of us as they struggle to barely survive from day to day.* These are the fields in which we test our mettle and learn our weak spots.... They give us intense opportunities and long conversations in which diverse people coming together learn to trust one another and find ways to move forward together. By pushing forward together, we learn to see—and make possible—new realities.... That said, even as issues of justice and injustice intersect and connect, you don't always get to choose which fronts you get to focus on—however, it opens the door for direct action to interrupt and expose what many perceive as an immoral agenda....The Fusion Coalition development work we must engage in is primarily of a cultural—not political—nature and be reflected in daily acts of solidarity in seeking justice and community building across the entire county. *It's about changing the narrative, and shifting the public conversation.* (Barber, 2016)

Some of the directions of several projects have changed dramatically because of this advice. Notable was a recent forum on the needs of immigrants and refugees who are not getting employment opportunities commensurate with their skill sets because of language and credentialing challenges. One outcome has been to help create a mentoring program to act as an interface between employers and employees to help them better understand each other and communicate more effectively. More consultation among volunteers and interfaith and community organization has resulted in better collaboration because we now have better understanding of what each group is doing and where volunteers are most needed. A network has been created to help refugees get to medical and legal documentation appointments in other cities. Our local Bahá'í community has focused on providing children's and junior youth classes to children from African refugee families in particular, as there are now two such families in our Bahá'í community.

One quote familiar to most Bahá'ís, which we discussed at great length in our library group, is as follows:

Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. Be fair in thy judgment, and guarded in thy speech. Be unjust to no man, and show all meekness to all men. Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. Let integrity and uprightness distinguish all thine acts. Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. Be eyes to the blind, and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring. Be an ornament to the countenance of truth, a crown to the brow of fidelity, a pillar of the temple of righteousness, a breath of life to the body of mankind, an ensign of the hosts of justice, a luminary above the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark on the ocean of knowledge, a sun in the heaven of bounty, a gem on the diadem of wisdom, a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, CXXX).

This passage, in my opinion, represents the crux of the ordinances of the Aqdas needed for community-building, and also embodies the various aspects called for in the Poor Peoples Campaign.

We also incorporated into our library discussion sessions some paragraphs from various authors such as Christopher Buck, Adib Taherzadeh, Roshan Danesh, and Robert Atkinson, relevant articles from BahaiTeachings.org and other sources such as the booklet *One Common Faith*. These texts conveyed attributes that my library group needs in order to pursue any lasting effort at transformative community building: constancy; being united with others; civility;

avoiding contention; avoiding disputation and dissension; avoiding backbiting by seeing the good; avoiding faultfinding.

Character and Conduct

In the section of the website Bahai.org on “Character and Conduct,” we find the following three passages from Bahá’í scripture: Bahá’u’lláh writes that we should fix our thoughts on “that which will sanctify ... the hearts and souls of men.” “This,” He continues, “can best be achieved through pure and holy deeds, through a virtuous life and a goodly behavior.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written: “How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfill his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further states: “We must strive unceasingly and without rest to accomplish the development of the spiritual nature in man, and endeavor with tireless energy to advance humanity toward the nobility of its true and intended station.” (“Character and Conduct,” n.d.)

These statements reflect the powerful encouragements given to us—at times succinctly, and at other times, metaphorically—in the Aqdas, and indeed throughout the entirety of the Bahá’í Writings. We truly live in an exciting time, albeit still in an embryonic stage in the development of the “Lesser Peace” as humanity struggles to move inexorably out of its adolescence into young adulthood. It is a time of increased capacity for independent investigation of truth and for truly embracing the concept that: “the earth is but one country and mankind its citizens” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablet of Maqsud*).

Quoting again from the Bahai.org website:

What is at stake is the transformative power of Revelation to refine the patterns of conduct of the individual, to uplift the hearts and souls of all people, to order humanity’s collective life, to shape culture, and to vitalize the structures of society—in the final analysis, to propel the

advancement of civilization. (“Divine Law,” n.d.)

One area that remains an ongoing challenge is that of racial prejudice. This has recently taken on new dimensions with our local influx of refugees from many different countries. Many members of the local-born population often have a very limited worldview. Shoghi Effendi, in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, calls for our ceaseless exertions in confronting this issue of paramount importance, which will require sacrifice on all our parts, not to mention care and vigilance, moral courage and fortitude, as well as tact and sympathy: “To discriminate against any race, on the ground of its being socially backward, politically immature, and numerically in a minority, is a flagrant violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh. The consciousness of any division or cleavage in its ranks is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals.” (Shoghi Effendi, 1938, p. 17)

I share here my favorite passage from Bahá’u’lláh’s Hidden Words because of its applicability to the above:

O CHILDREN OF MEN! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Hidden Words, Arabic* #68)

I must add a mention of some plans and ideas for further implementation. One successful initiative to be undertaken by members of our library discussion group is organizing a Race Amity Day interfaith multicultural celebration and picnic. We plan to incorporate a “mural

project” from drawings submitted to us that depict the intersection(s) of the many facets of the Dayton community. The winning drawing(s) will then become a mural put together by volunteers from the community. It will be displayed at the new community co-op food market being built in one of the primary food desert areas of the community. It is very likely that if several drawings are selected, they will be displayed in other similar locations throughout the city.

I would like briefly to share here some additional thoughts about unity and supportive virtues called for in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that have seen this community through some very challenging times in the past year.

We experienced the sudden closing and demolition —without notice—of a major hospital in one of the poorest neighborhoods, leaving them with no reasonable healthcare options. Shortly after that, the city and surrounding area was hit by 14 devastating tornadoes in one night that left many people, especially those in low income neighborhoods, with no place to live. Many are still struggling to this day to find adequate and affordable housing or to rebuild when and where possible. The Ku Klux Klan decided to come in and stage a rally shortly thereafter to try to disseminate more hate and fear. And if that weren’t enough, one poor soul decided that he had to go on a killing rampage one night and shot 14 people in a popular downtown nighttime area.

We are told that there will always be a balance of crises and victories. We certainly have had our share of crises in this past year. And yet we can also claim our share of victories as we have become “Dayton Strong.” Never before has this (county-wide) community come together in such a unified way to work for the good of any and all in need. Neighbors-helping-neighbors took on new dimensions as people—who didn’t live in the tornado devastated areas—set up food carts for those helping to clear away the debris. Others created triage services that helped people get documents and then get connected with the proper agencies to get help. Although the protests over the hospital closing didn’t change the outcome, it brought the faith communities together in

new ways and there is now talk of how to provide transportation services to existing healthcare services. The Klan rally fizzled as the community held a “counter rally/love celebration” across town. The community rallied around the families of those attacked in the Oregon District and a special fund was rapidly set up, as was one for the tornado victims.

So out of all these tragedies, a new spirit of service, love, and unity has emerged—and although the dust has seemingly settled, that spirit appears to be continuing to grow rather than diminish. Service created a special form of closeness and interdependence, friendship and joy, kindness and concern, as well as love and unity. I am reminded of this passage from *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*:

It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.... That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 249)

Early in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh clearly enjoins us to:

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!”

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, para. 5)

How exciting it has been to discover, through independent investigation of truth and deeper study of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, that one can come to appreciate this “choice wine.” Some of the qualities and virtues expounded in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, as highlighted by Habib Riazati’s materials, were fairness; justice; steadfastness; acquisition of knowledge; patience; wisdom and tact; not causing sadness; tenacity; sincerity; trustworthiness; truthfulness; courtesy; detachment;

uprightness; fellowship; kindness; humility; love; and hospitality (Riazati, 2003). These became prevalent in our community during the crises we endured this past year. I invite you to consider their applicability in situations you might encounter.

Conclusion

The progress that has occurred here in Dayton and the impact of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas on our progress is but a small example of the community-building work that we are called on to introduce to the world. As part of this process, we must call to mind the incomparable example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, whose perceptive and uncompromising sense of justice, infinite love, and ceaseless encouragement elucidated the meaning of His Father’s Writings and helped set the pattern of Bahá’í service that encouraged the library discussion group’s course of action.

Despite the sacrificial efforts of countless people over many generations to remold our society according to noble ideals and despite the genuine progress that has been made, we sadly continue to remain bogged down in those “systemic interlocking social evils” that Rev. William Barber and the Poor Peoples Campaign have helped to shine a spotlight on i.e., rampant materialism, communities sunk in ever-deepening and more deplorable moral decay, and a society enmeshed in a deep-seated and seemingly intractable form of racism that manifests itself in virtually every dimension of our public and private lives.

Even for those of us who have accepted the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh, however earnest our desire to follow the precepts of our faith, we are alas not always resistant to the insidious influence of these forces and the insensitivities and injustices to which they give rise. These challenges are the result of our immature and incomplete understanding and practice of the shining truth of the oneness of humanity. This is the lesson that we have been learning in our library group: hearts must be entirely transformed; patterns of community life must be created that will, over time, manifestly and magnetically demonstrate the richness and splendor of Bahá’u’lláh’s unifying

teachings; and the vision these teachings provide is one that can be shared and worked toward by all in a collaborative and consultative manner. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice, *quoted in a letter by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States to the November 2019 Pupil of the Eye conference*, stated “that it is [t]hrough collective action in the various social spaces in which the friends are wholeheartedly engaged to translate the Teachings into action that they will, through mistakes and difficulties, with love and forbearance, learn to resolve challenges pertaining to race, both within their communities and in the society at large” (*National Spiritual Assembly, 2019*).

My hope is that this brief exposition of the experiences and efforts of the Dayton community through the interfaith “Passage into Spiritual Maturity” library discussion group’s deepening--based on the Aqdas, the Bahá’í Writings in general, and supportive materials by selected Bahá’í authors—will provide some food for thought for others who wish to delve into the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and explore its “choice wine” from a new perspective.

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