Faith, Reason, and Society in Bahá'í Perspective

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The question of the relationship, relative validity, and the authority of faith versus reason is a serious theological issue that has far-reaching social, political, economic, and cultural implications. The Bahá'í teachings concerning faith and reason offer a tolerant and dialectical perspective that transcends the regressive tendencies of both total rationalism and religious fundamentalism. In the Bahá'í view, reason is historical. Consequently, Bahá'ís accept both the validity and limitations of reason and rational understanding. The Bahá'í sacred writings themselves indicate the dynamic, open, and substantive Bahá'í approach to the historicity of both faith and reason. Moreover, one may argue that a universal and historical Bahá'í theology offers the potential for (1) the development of a democratic social and political order, (2) an inclusive religious identity, (3) a culture of critical and rational discourse, and (4) a responsible utopianism. These four dimensions of the Bahá'í perspective may be analyzed, and their sociological implications compared to the alternative perspectives of fundamentalist religion and the "myth of total reason."

The Historical Nature of Reason

A fundamental thesis of Bahá'í epistemology, made explicit in the Bahá'í sacred writings, is the idea that reason is both a valid, authoritative source of knowledge and, at the same time, a partial and limited source. Belief in the significance and validity of reason is so essential to the Bahá'í perspective that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í faith, and the authorized interpreter of His father's writings, has declared it to be one of the fundamental elements of Bahá'í theology:

> Religion must be in conformity to science and reason. If a religion does not agree with the postulates of science nor accord with the regulations of reason it is a bundle of superstitions; a phantasm of the brain. Science and religion are realities, and if that religion to which we adhere be a reality it must needs conform to the fundamental reality of all things.[1]

'Abdu'l-Bahá also states that,

> If religious belief and doctrine is at variance with reason, it proceeds from the limited mind of man and not from God; therefore, it is unworthy of belief and not deserving of attention; the heart finds no rest in it, and real faith is impossible. How can men believe that which he knows to be opposed to reason?… Reason is the first faculty of man, and the religion of God is in harmony with it.[2]

At the same time, the Bahá'í teachings emphasize the limitations of rationality and rational knowledge. According to Bahá'í philosophy, there are alternative means of approaching truth, each of which captures some specific aspects of concrete reality. Reason, therefore, is valid but not exhaustive. The Bahá'í approach demands that there be multiple perspectives on reality, that the nonrational dimensions of human understanding—the aesthetic, the spiritual, the intuitive,

the mystical—be developed. The Bahá'í thesis of rationality, consequently, avoids an obsessive rejection of all revelational forms of knowledge as found in positivism, mechanistic materialism, and scientism. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, referring to the vacillation in ancient times between heliocentric and geocentric theories, writes:

> Thus all the mathematicians disagreed, although they relied upon arguments of reason. In the same way, by logical arguments, they would prove a problem at a certain time, then afterward by arguments of the same nature they would deny it. So one of the philosophers would firmly uphold a theory for a time with strong arguments and proofs to support it, which afterward he would retract and contradict by arguments of reason. Therefore, it is evident that the method of reason is not perfect, for the differences of the ancient philosophers, the want of stability and the variations of their opinions, prove this. For if it were perfect, all ought to be united in their ideas and agreed in their opinions.[3]

Moreover, a closer look at Bahá'í teachings makes it clear that the thesis of the simultaneous validity and limitation of reason is based on the notion of the historical nature of reason. Any apparent contradiction between a belief in reason and a simultaneous conviction that reason is limited is overcome by an understanding of the historical character of reason in Bahá'í thought.

The thesis of the historicity of reason is built on the idea that both the objective reality of the divine word and the subjective reality of the human mind are constantly changing and developing. Knowledge—as a relationship between a changing subject and a changing object—therefore, must necessarily be dynamic and historical. The subject of knowledge (reason) is not a transcendental entity outside of life, history, and society. On the contrary, the Bahá'í view finds that all religious or rational understanding must accord with a specific stage of social and historical development, the structure of concrete possibilities available in a particular environment of time and space. This limiting definition implies that the social position of the human subject must shape the perspective and the theoretical structure of reason. Reason, therefore, is not an autonomous, neutral, transcendental, or static medium. Rather, reason emerges out of life; it is limited and formed by the experiences – historical, social, economic, cultural, generational, sexual, racial, ethnic, political, among many others – as well as the location, and the environment of any specific human being.

The dynamic and historical conception of reason in Bahá'í epistemology, as I understand it, has far-reaching theoretical consequences. The first and immediate implication is the necessity for continuous and progressive revelation. If all things are changing, and if the human subject is historical, it follows that no specific revelation can exhaust the totality of reality. In other words, the dynamic character of reality implies that both the ontological and normative statements of a particular religion can only be valid for a specific social and historical situation. Both truth and value are relative and historically specific phenomena.

It is an established fact that the rules and norms of society are (at least partially) human-made phenomena the validity of which is conditioned upon the logic of the social totality. Further, these regularities among various social phenomena that can be studied sociologically are themselves only applicable to specific forms of society, to specific modes of production, to specific cultural and symbolic environments, and to a specific societal context. No statement or value that is valid for a specific historical context is necessarily valid in a foreign historical framework.

The only way a revelation could be made valid for all societies, all periods of history, and all contexts would be if the revelation restricted itself to purely abstract and general statements devoid of specific content or meaning. Such a transhistorical revelation would be equivalent to

an assembly of words without content. Ultimately, such a revelation could only be expressed in a negative language—the language of silence.

The belief in the historical character and the relativity of revelation implies that it is not only human reason, but also the divine intellect, that is historical.[4] Actually, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has made apparently contradictory statements concerning the Bahá’í principle of the agreement of religion and reason. In some of His writings He has emphasized that it is the divine and universal intellect (*aql-i kull-i 'ilahi*) that must correspond with religion.[5] In other places, however, He clearly states that it is ordinary human reason with which religion must come to terms.

Bearing in mind the historical nature of reason (both divine and human) we can see that there exists no contradiction in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's statements. Rather, the historicity of reason implies that both propositions are necessary preconditions of any meaningful theology. The divine mind is the historical unfoldment of the unity of subject and object in the generative, creative and progressive word of God. Consequently, if religion is to accord with the divine mind, it has to be reconstructed and transformed anew in each age in accordance with the dynamic and changing nature of that divine mind (which, in turn, corresponds to a changing social and historical reality). The Bahá’í teachings remain true to this theoretical construct. Bahá’ís maintain silence concerning the transcendent essence of God, which is thought to be unknowable. The divine mind or will is represented by the Manifestation of God, Who is renewed and transformed in each age in accordance with a new social and historical reality.[6] Revelation is explicitly regarded as relative and changing.

The second implication of the doctrine of the historicity of reason is the necessity, the significance, and the validity of rational understanding, dynamic individual interpretation, and collective analysis. Revelation, and its symbolic and linguistic representations, can apply only to a specific period of time. This limitation means that the content of a divine revelation must be flexible enough to accommodate all the diverse and concrete potentialities of a particular age. Consequently, the sacred text cannot have only one valid and real meaning. In fact, the holy text must hold within itself all the diverse and dynamic potentialities of the age that will be defined and constrained by the structural requirements of that historical period. The sacred text, therefore, represents a potential source of alternative and dynamic meanings.

Since reason is historical, any understanding or interpretation of the divine word represents the fusion of a specific and limited perspective with the rich and multifaceted horizon of the sacred Text.[7] Accordingly, no specific understanding of the word of God can exhaust the totality of the meanings of the revelation. The dynamic theology of the Bahá’í faith emphasizes the agreement of faith and reason. While insisting on the historicity of reason, it demands the constant application of rational thinking, the utilization of diverse perspectives, and the appreciation of approaches from different cultural backgrounds to realize and actualize the potential of the Bahá’í revelation for the creation of a world civilization. Any claim that one form of understanding the revelation exhausts the historical complexity of the Faith is contrary to the Bahá’í spirit and threatens to transform a dynamic Bahá’í theology into a reified, ahistorical, static, and lifeless body of linguistic symbol.

One might note that the rejection of the notions of the historicity of reason and the progressive nature of revelation have caused serious and unreasonable intellectual contradictions in traditional theological discourse. Perhaps one of the most sophisticated debates over the relationship between faith and reason is to be found in the historical controversy between two Islamic schools of thought—the Asharite and the Mutazilite—in the early Muslim centuries. These two schools took contradictory positions on five essential theological questions. First, the

Mutazilites believed in the validity of reason and rational understanding. For them, the use of rational discourse to discover the hidden meanings of the verses of the Qur'án was necessary and valid. The Asharaites, on the contrary, rejected the validity of reason and called for a blind and literal understanding of scripture—that is, the Qur'án and the Islamic traditions. Second, the rationalistic premises of the Mutazilites led them to maintain that God is a transcendental reality devoid of attributes or determinations. Asharaites believed in an anthropomorphic God, with attributes taken to be real and literal, and not metaphorical. Third, the Mutazilites believed that the word of God—the Qur'án—is not eternal and coexistent with God, but created and temporal. Hence for them, the verses of the Qur'án should be understood to be specific and applicable only to a relevant context. For the Asharaites, however, the Qur'án was eternal and uncreated and, therefore, valid for any time, for any situation, and in any context. Fourth, Mutazilites accepted the notion of the law of causality and the laws of nature, while in Asharite theology causality was merely an illusion; every event in the world is directly created by the will of God, and nothing can be explained in naturalistic terms. Finally, Mutazilite theology admitted some freedom of will for individual human beings. Asharaites advocated a deterministic philosophy. Unfortunately for the cause of reason, the religious and political battle between the rationalist Mutazilites and the literalist Asharaites was concluded in the 11th century by a decisive victory for the Asharaites.[8]

Admittedly, Islamic rationalism was trapped in an impossible paradox. On the one hand, the rationalists attempted to define the word of God as historical. On the other, they continued to regard the Islamic revelation as the final one, valid for any historical situation. To protect the rationality and relevance of Islam, Muslim rationalists eventually had no choice but to reduce their religion to empty theological symbols the content of which was to be provided by often contradictory theoretical, political, cultural, economic, and ideological concepts borrowed from non-Muslim civilizations. This tendency was particularly pronounced in the liberal Islamic movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The contradictions between the historical reality of the modern age and traditional Islamic tenets forced the liberals to choose reason over Islam, at its expense. The result was a secular, Western ideology disguised in occasional Islamic symbols.

In contrast, traditionalist Muslim theologians chose fundamentalism as a solution to the contradictions they saw between the developments of the modern age and age-old Islamic precepts. Islamic fundamentalism rejects secular rationality and deplores much of the dynamic development of recent history. It calls for a return to an idealized and imaginary past. It is obsessed only with the most visible elements of traditional Muslim religiosity—the segregation of the sexes, the position of religious minorities, the dietary laws, the prohibition of alcohol, and the like; and it finds the world filled with sin and vice. Fundamentalism chooses blind, intolerant repression as a solution to the gap between a living and dynamic human reality and an outmoded and reified body of traditions.

The contrast between the rationalists and the traditionalists is made particularly clear when one examines their approaches to the issue of metaphors and allegories in the sacred texts. As the late Dr. 'Alímurád Dávúdí of Iran has noted, the rationalists were able to point to explicit statements in the Qur'án to support their view that much of the scripture is couched in metaphorical statements the real meanings of which lie hidden beyond the literal, textual statements—for example, in the Qur'ánic verses that state:

> He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book; in it there are verses that are fundamental—they are the basis of the Book—and there are others which are allegoric. Wherefore, those

> in whose hearts is perversity pursue such thereof as are allegoric seeking to create confusion and to pervert their meaning, and none knows the meaning thereof except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge.[9]

Although they themselves use the words of the holy texts, the rationalists argued that the application of reason to discover the real, the intended, and the hidden meanings of the sacred scriptures was both valid and necessary; although they argued that to confine the meanings to only literal ones is to fabricate a religious understanding contrary to the will and purpose of the revelation itself, their arguments were rejected.

The traditionalists contended that the holy texts acknowledge the existence of metaphorical meanings, but they insisted that human reason cannot unravel those meanings. The hidden meanings, in other words, are known only to the revelation itself. Therefore, the only source for an understanding of the scripture is the text itself, and not human rational endeavor. One can easily note the circular, contradictory, and paradoxical nature of the argument and of the consciousness it generates.

Bahá'í philosophy resolves the paradox by offering the theory of progressive revelation, a concept that applies both between and within dispensations. For example, the Universal House of Justice, the international governing and legislative body of the Bahá'í Faith, is an institution founded on the premise of the historicity of reason. That institution offers dynamic guidance and inspiration through a dialogical, consultative, administrative structure—guidance that can be abrogated whenever conditions make it necessary to do so.

A third significant implication of the historical theory of reason is the Bahá'í insistence on "unity of station" (*vahdat-i-maqám*) for all human beings, and a vehement rejection of elitism and paternalistic rationalism. By the latter term is intended the thesis that confines rational understanding to a limited segment of the society whose decisions must be blindly followed by the irrational mass of the people. Bahá'í philosophy not only emphasizes the validity of reason but also insists on the rational capacity, responsibility, and independent judgment of each and every human being.

A position amounting to paternalistic rationalism is shared by such diverse ideological orientations as technocratic theory, economistic Marxism, and religious fundamentalism. The revival of rationalism in the Islamic modernist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, was oriented toward paternalistic rationalism and never toward a democratic theological or political vision.

Likewise, the recent rise of Shi'ah fundamentalism in Iran finds its foundations in this paternalistic approach. The Usúlí school of Shi'ah theology from the nineteenth century to the present fundamentalist resurgence has emphasized the exclusivist approach to rational thought. This tradition accepts the idea that religious jurists must use their own rational capacity to derive new and relevant injunctions from the basic Islamic texts and precepts (*ijtihád*). However, the tradition also insists that the ordinary Muslim is incapable of such independent rational judgment and, therefore, must imitate and obey a qualified doctor of the law (*mujtahid*). These Usúlí premises of Shi'ah fundamentalism, then, present a paternalistic rationalism that functions to concentrate power in clerical hands and eliminates the possibility of democratic, clerical, humanistic, or popular participation.

Bahá'í theology, however, vehemently rejects such paternalistic rationalism. The thesis of the historicity of reason implies that every human mind can capture some aspects of a manifold concrete reality, while no human mind can claim to encompass the whole. Similarly, every believer can grasp some aspect of divine revelation, and no one person can pretend to have

exhausted its truth. Therefore, Bahá'ís reject the claim of any individual to a privileged monopoly of interpretation and understanding of the religion. On the contrary, all human interpretations may have some validity as long as they are tolerant of diversity and make no claim to universal or binding authority. The elimination of all clergy within the Bahá'í faith and the rejection of emulation as a valid path to God are direct consequences of the premise of the unity of station for all human beings, a point made explicit by Bahá'u'lláh Himself in His Lawh-i Ittihád.

Democratic rationalism and dialogical hermeneutics are fundamental elements of the consultative structure of the Bahá'í administrative system and form the basis of the Bahá'í vision of an egalitarian world order.

The fourth and final implication of the theory of the historicity of reason is the rejection of such intolerant and exclusive rationalism as is created by the myth of total reason. By this term is intended any system or theory claiming any of the following ideas: the belief that reality is purely and exclusively rational (or, in terms of human action, that human behavior is rational); the belief that human reason has discovered the essence of social and historical reality, has created an exact science of society and history, and has discovered laws of change that can predict the future; and the belief that any approach to knowledge other than a rational or scientific one is meaningless, false, imaginary, or irrational—in other words, that faith, revelation, mystic intuition, existential illumination, and the like, have no validity.

An extensive critique of the premises of the myth of total reason would require a separate paper, if not a book. Suffice it to say that, as modern physics has demonstrated, reality is much more complex than a mechanistic rationalism would lead one to expect. Furthermore, as the sociological critique of the classical assumptions of positivist economic theory has shown, human action is not only rational and scientific but also normative and nonrational.

Both the voluntaristic theories of action and the critical theory of the Frankfurt school reject the reduction of normative human action to a logic of instrumental and technocratic rationality.[10] The sociology of knowledge, as well as the theory of ideology, have demonstrated that reason is rooted in the interests and dynamics of life. Consequently, any notion of a disinterested, objective, unbiased approach to reality represents a false consciousness on the part of reason itself. Finally, as Max Weber and Georg Simmel, two of the greatest social theorists of this century, have argued, our knowledge of a vastly complex reality is not adequate to provide us with an exact science of history that would allow us to make categorical holistic propositions about the totality of being. The myth of total reason, then, overlooks the limits of sociological knowledge and advocates a kind of irrationalism in the name of reason.[11]

The dialectics of the German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), and his phenomenology of reason, along with the Marxist theories of ideology and historical materialism, agree with the Bahá'í position that reason is historical, truth is relative, and reason is conditioned by social and historical reality.[12] Hegel and Marx, however, differ drastically from the Bahá'í perspective when they refuse to apply the idea of the historicity of reason to their own theories, claim a myth of total reason, pretend an objectivity that transcends history, and declare an end of the dialectic.[13]

For Bahá'í philosophy, dialectics can have no end. Reason is always conditioned, limited, progressive, and historical. The Bahá'í Faith openly declares its own revelation to be relative and explicitly anticipates the need for future revelations, progressive new horizons, and more advanced perspectives. Bahá'í philosophy refuses to be contaminated by any intolerant, static, or conservative philosophy that might exalt the status quo.

The Bahá'í belief in the historicity of reason is a powerful critique of the myth of total reason. The Bahá'í writings insist that reason is not a transcendental phenomenon but a product of history—an integral and organic manifestation of life in general and social life in particular. But if reason is merely a specific manifestation and presentation of life, and if its horizon is limited by its own historicity and form, it follows that the dynamic flow and concrete structure of reality can represent itself in diverse forms. These forms are parallel to each other, incommensurable, different but not contradictory, valid but not exhaustive of reality. They fulfill alternate purposes, needs, and potentialities of life and human reality. For example, art, religion, drama, science, ethics, and the like represent different presentations of life and reality through different logics, languages, conditions, and meanings. Bahá'í epistemology, accordingly, accepts the validity and limitations of such diverse approaches to truth, accepts the complex character of the existence of human mystery, and calls for a tolerant and multifaceted development of human potential.[14]

Reason and Faith in Comparative Perspective

Serious students of comparative religions may encounter immediate difficulties in studying the Bahá'í Faith in relation to Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and other world religions. One problem of comparison arises from the unique formal structure found in Bahá'í scriptures. If one looks at traditional scriptures, one notes that their dominant elements are metaphorical statements, mythology, rituals, and commandments. In other words, such scriptures are primarily characterized by a symbolic, metaphorical, and poetic mode of discourse – and by extended, concrete, and detailed legal ordinances. It is not surprising, then, to find that the primary relationship between reason and faith in traditional theology has been one of opposition, hostility, contradiction, and intolerance.

Even those philosophers and rationalists who have tried to defend a rationalist theology have, for the most part, characterized the religious approach to truth as an inferior, limited—even a distorted—form of knowledge. According to such rationalist theologians of past traditions, religion should be accepted as a symbolic, metaphorical, and vulgar expression of philosophical truth and the meaning of life. The arguments they use are based on the assumption that religion is a social institution that must appeal to the minds and hearts of the common people and influence the behavior of the mass of society. Since the rational capacity of the masses is limited, and their understanding of pure, abstract, and complex ideas is necessarily inadequate, so the truth of pure revelation must be translated into a symbolic and mythological language in order to become an effective social instrument. Religion must be diluted to become a useful social institution.

For such rationalist theology, therefore, the essence of religious truth is nothing but pure philosophy. The prophet or founder of a religion is seen, ultimately, as an exceptional philosopher who has access to a special consciousness of truth—called revelation. The prophet is the embodiment of reason and intellect—the Word. However, social and political necessities and the need for the institutionalization of his teachings force the prophet to speak in the language of his community. He is a philosopher who cannot communicate his revelation directly but must choose the symbolic medium of metaphors, rituals, and concrete laws to convey his meaning to common human beings.

Such an approach to traditional theology can be summarized in three basic propositions: first, that the essence of prophecy and religion is philosophy and philosophical truth; second, that the language and the institutions of religion represent the vulgarization of philosophical truth for the sake of popularization (in other words, religion is the mediocre philosophy of the common people who cannot understand the complexity of higher truth); and third, that religion and the

language of religion are limited and distorted media of knowledge inferior, and sometimes contradictory, to the culture of rationality and the rational knowledge of reality.

Such rationalistic assumptions can be found in a number of philosophical and sociological theories of religion. It was Abu Nasr Farabi, among the Islamic philosophers, who first systematically formulated a theory of prophecy as acquired intellect (*aql-i mustafad*). According to Farabi, the essence of religious truth is available to philosophers alone, while the masses received only a metaphorical presentation of the pure truth of revelation.[15] Following Farabi, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), a twelfth-century Muslim philosopher, developed and expanded the same theoretical approach.[16]

Hegel's philosophy of mind reaches the same conclusions. Hegel argued that the dynamic complexity of the totality of reality presents itself in three distinct forms. Although each of these forms captures only limited aspects of reality, the symbolic and the ceremonial presentations of truth are inferior to the comprehensive capacity of direct and speculative philosophy. Therefore, art and religion are seen as two pre-rational forms of understanding reality the ultimate potential of which is realized in a higher form of understanding that is rational and philosophical.[17]

Within sociological literature, it is usually the theory of the routinization and institutionalization of charisma (or revelation) that most directly expresses the rationalistic critique of traditional religion. According to versions of this theory, the pragmatic requisites for the institutionalization of religion cause theoretical and practical considerations between the pragmatic methods and the revelational ideas of religion—between practical means and pure ends. Such contradictions, in turn, lead to the distortion of religious truth and meaning, resulting in a superficial, legalistic, obsessive, literalist, and fundamentalist interpretation of religion that must oppose and contradict both rational discourse and scientific development. Although such institutionalization theories admit that at times a strict religious belief and mentality have encouraged the development of economic rationality, capitalism, and scientific discoveries (as with early Protestantism), these are seen as unintended consequences, latent functions, of religious belief that have resulted in the extension of rationality, not as conscious and theoretical functions of these religions.[18]

A fundamental difference between the formal structures of the Bahá'í Faith and those of older religions lies in the fact that, as opposed to traditional scriptures, the Bahá'í sacred writings include a diversity of forms, languages, and approaches to a concrete and dynamic reality. Since the rationalist attack on religious theology is based on the assumption that the primary form of scripture is necessarily metaphorical, mythological, legalistic, ritualistic, and ceremonial, the student of comparative religion often accepts a paradigm that contrasts religious forms and language with philosophical and rational (or mystical) forms and languages, defining them as polar opposites.

Confronted with Bahá'í scriptures and the nature of the Bahá'í revelation, the religious expert will find such limited categories and formal definitions of religious expression inadequate. The Bahá'í writings address rational, mystical, and legal issues directly, explicitly, and extensively. They also present a number of diverse forms, languages, and categories. For example, the Prophet-Herald of the Bahá'í Faith, the Bab, has cited His extensive philosophical writings as evidence of the truth of His revelation—underscoring their importance in His mind. Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, has produced diverse kinds of writings including mystical treaties (for example, The Ode of the Dove, *The Seven Valleys*, *The Four Valleys*); rational philosophical essays (such as the Tablet of Wisdom, the *Book of Certitude*, the Tablet to Maqsúd); legal ordinances (such as the Most Holy Book, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*); and others. Similarly, the writings of

‘Abdu’l-Bahá include many explicit discussions of philosophy, epistemology, polity, sociology, the nature of civilization, hermeneutics, and so forth. Finally, Shoghi Effendi, the grandson and appointed successor of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, has written on historical, administrative, and sociopolitical issues and developments.[19]

Some epistemological implications of the unusual characteristics of the Bahá’í sacred writings might be noted here. The modes of expression and various languages in the Bahá’í text reflect the Bahá’í belief that concrete reality is infinitely complex and that various forms of approach to this complex reality capture only limited aspects of the concrete whole; none of them exhaust the totality of dynamic truth. The fact that the Bahá’í revelation has assumed various forms of expression testifies both to the validity and to the limitation of various forms of human understanding.

Accordingly, for Bahá’ís, reason, revelation, and mysticism are all significant and valid modes for the realization of the dynamic unfoldment of reality. Bahá’í epistemology, therefore, must reject any exclusive claim to validity or authority by any one criterion of knowledge; it strongly refutes the belief that any one form of understanding can possess a privileged or total encompassing of truth. Not surprisingly, therefore, neither obsessive, positivistic fascination with empirical science (with its arrogant rejection of the validity of any other form of knowledge) nor the intolerance of religious fanaticism, irrationalism, or fundamentalism (with its equally arrogant dismissal of historical influences on scripture and its appalling denial of the significance of human reason) is an acceptable epistemological position for Bahá’í philosophy.

In the history of traditional world religions there have been explicit philosophical and mystical formulations and approaches to religious beliefs and scriptural interpretation. However, such philosophy and mysticism were never plainly elaborated within the sacred scriptures of these religions. Instead, it was often a small minority of the believers within these faiths who articulated rationalist and mystic formulations to defend their religions. And this situation was usually the logical result of the confrontation of such religions with hostile and skeptical intellectual surroundings. The fact, however, that the language of scripture was nonrational provided a strong basis of attack on rationalists and mystics by priests and religious jurists. The latter also found in the scriptures a justification for a literal, legalistic, and ritualized reading of the holy words. Rational or mystical approaches to faith were usually rejected and their followers persecuted.

In the history of Islam, for example, the rationalist, mystical, and legalistic approaches to the Qur’án—and to the religion in general—can be clearly differentiated in the philosophers, the Súfís, and the 'ulamá, respectively. The period between the eighth and twelfth centuries A.D. witnessed the differentiation and articulation of all three approaches to the Islamic revelation. The subsequent dark ages of Islamic civilization were, however, characterized by the dominance of the 'ulamá, and their legalistic school, over the rationalist approach. This development was accompanied by the defeat and degeneration of Islamic mysticism into a cult of personality and superstitious veneration of past saints. The hostility of religious institutions to the rationalist approach led to the frequent necessity for Muslim philosophers to practice dissimulation in their philosophical writings.

The Bahá’í theory of progressive revelation, with its sociological implications, provides some perceptive suggestions concerning the reasons for the differences between the formal structure of Bahá’í scriptures and those of previous religions. The idea of progressive revelation involves the notion that religious and spiritual progress is intimately related to the progress of other social and political institutions. Therefore, both the form and the content of divine revelation are

historically specific phenomena whose dynamic nature and transformation must accord with the logic of the structural imperatives of society in its various economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions.

We might speculate, then, why reason could not have been a significant factor in the language and discourse, the content and practice, of traditional religions. Perhaps the social structures of past societies could not develop or sustain a popular, egalitarian, and public culture of rationalism and critical discourse. There are various reasons to believe this hypothesis.

Precapitalist societies were characterized by the maintenance of rigid distinctions between human beings in terms of status, caste, race, religion, and sex. These distinctions were accompanied by inequality before the law, differential political rights, and authority derived from status, class, and privilege of the individual speaker and were manifested in his or her language. In such a situation it is natural that all statements tend to be validated by authority rather than by rationality. In other words, the binding character of any statement becomes a function of the social class and status of the speaker, not of the rationality of his arguments.

The advent of capitalist economies signaled a qualitative break with past social orders. Rationality was emphasized through the differentiation of economics from the political realm and the increased reasonableness of all economic enterprises and organizations. The latter was achieved by emphasis on the division of labor, functional differentiation, individualism, the systematic application of scientific methods to production, and the rise of bureaucratic organization. These changes were motivated, of course, by a competitive urge for the maximization of profits.

But it was not only the Industrial (economic and social) Revolution and the French (political and social) Revolution but also the Communications (cultural and social) Revolution that was directly responsible for the triumph of the norm of rationality and rational discourse. In fact, this last revolution had the most direct influence on the structure of human perception and worldview, transforming ideas into products that could be made available to all human beings and creating the possibility of universal education. The Communications Revolution created relatively autonomous centers of information that could offer alternative accounts to those obtained from the traditional sources of information, the dominant institutions—whether the state, business, or religion.

Diversity of centers of information and analysis gave rise to writing as the dominant mode of communication. In contrast to local, situational, face-to-face interaction, the written word implies an audience of strangers—an audience that has no access to any nonlinguistic signification for the writer. Consequently, the author can take no assumption for granted. He or she must explicate ideas in an impersonal manner, with a critical orientation. This limitation results in an emphasis on reason, the development of a written culture of rationality, and the dominance of rationality in discourse.

Capitalism, in other words, may have been responsible for the entry of the public into the realms of political, cultural, and critical discourse. The language of the Bahá'í scriptures reflects this historical change, validating the new significance of rationality in human affairs. The theology of the Bahá'í Faith, in turn, offers alternatives transcending the institutional limitations on rationality that are imposed by the unequal distribution of social and economic resources in capitalist societies and the irrationalities of nationalistic political and economic frameworks.

Some Social Consequences of the Bahá'í Approach

The Bahá'í perspective on the relationship between faith and reason has important social,

political, and cultural consequences. The social impact of Bahá'í epistemology might be compared with that of the opposing theories of religious fundamentalism and the myth of total reason. Fundamentalism rejects the validity and significance of reason and regards a dogmatic interpretation of scripture and tradition as the only source of authority. Total rationalism rejects faith and advocates an exclusivist myth of reason. A Bahá'í approach, however, balances the validity and significance, as well as the relativity and limitation, of both faith and reason.

Although extreme rationalism and fundamentalist religion seem to offer utterly contradictory views of reality, their sociological consequences and implications are rather similar. Both perspectives share an underlying reification, a compulsive fixation, which suppresses a perception of concrete, organic, and dynamic life. Their perspectives are mediated through extremist, intolerant, and static categories. One may contend that such perspectives lead to a repressive social and political order, an exclusivist identity, a culture of closed and distorted discourse, and an ideal of despotic utopianism.

One may also argue that Bahá'í epistemology will tend to lead to a democratic sociopolitical order, an inclusive identity, a culture of rational and critical discourse, and a responsible utopianism. The Bahá'í theory of knowledge and truth directly encourages a democratic mentality and a tolerant culture. The idea that truth is multifaceted, that no single approach or form can exhaust the totality of reality, suggests an open dialogue among people with diverse points of view. It tends to give democratic validity to the voice of each individual human being. Both religious fundamentalism and the myth of total reason demand the rejection of alternative points of view and, consequently, the repression of democratic norms.

Fundamentalism claims an absolute, ahistorical, exclusive, and unquestionable validity for the Word of God as contained in a body of scripture and tradition. Rejecting any alternative ideas, the fundamentalists define every person and every issue clearly as either godly or satanic and usually feel a divine mission to suppress, silence, or eliminate whatever is found to be satanic. They insist that their religion has provided complete answers for any individual or any social problem. Consequently, they reject any independent human rational judgment, human legislation, or human decision-making.

For religious fundamentalism, the concept of God has a repressive, rather than a democratic, interpretation. A democratic understanding of the divine suggests that each person is created by the same God and that, therefore, everyone carries within himself or herself a divine light, the image of God. All human beings must be regarded by one holding such a view as ends in themselves, and all are equal. A democratic notion of God provides the basis for the repudiation of human discrimination, repression, or violation of human rights.

Bahá'u'lláh, in His writings, has specifically validated a democratic interpretation of the notion of God. He states:

> O CHILDREN OF MEN!
>
> Know ye not why We have 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.[20]

Religious fundamentalism, by contrast, offers a repressed interpretation of God. From that point of view, since God is absolute truth, and since that truth is embodied in the Word of God—

the scriptures and the traditions—human beings must be divided into two distinct groups: the believers and the unbelievers. The believers are the champions of what is good and true, while the unbelievers are absolutely evil. Consequently, the nonbelievers must be suppressed or purged, their freedom of speech denied, their civil and political rights revoked.

It is curious that the position of extremist rationalism, as represented by the myth of total reason, leads to the same repressive and antihumanist political consequences as are encouraged by the rationalism of fundamentalist religion. The myth of total reason is, in fact, inherently antidemocratic. In the first place, its advocates claim to possess an absolute, "scientific" knowledge of social and historical reality. Such knowledge places them in a position to make dogmatic and categorical decisions for everyone. In fact, any theory that claims to possess an exact science of social reality sows the germ of intolerance and despotism. For example, one might point to Hitler's "scientific racism" or Stalin's "scientific" discovery of the Iron Laws of History. An extremist rationalism leaves no space for diversity, for disagreement, for criticism.

Although the myth of total reason insists that it has come to a rational understanding of the totality of historical reality, the fact is that our human knowledge of the whole is extremely limited and tentative. Consequently, extreme rationalists must resort to emotional generalizations and unfounded structural propositions in the guise of reason. The results are empty propositions, simplistic generalizations, and ideological fantasies dressed in the mantle of rationality. The myth of total reason, in other words, destroys reason and replaces it with substitute gratifications and irrationalism. Since concrete reality is always infinitely more complex than the human mind can grasp, dogmatic simplifications fall short. Advocates of total rationalism must, therefore, engage in censorship, suppression, and repression to hide the widening gap between their theory and the real world.

True to its democratic implications, Bahá’í epistemology leads to an inclusive human identity—a larger identity that is not defined in terms of any particular category, group, or ideology but is inclusive of all human beings. This identity is that of "world citizens," "lovers of mankind," "members of the human race."[21] Acknowledging the validity of diverse manifestations of life and truth, the Bahá’í Faith calls for a universal perspective. It rejects a division of the world into two clearly defined camps of champions of truth and spreaders of falsehood. On the contrary, an important part of Bahá’í identity is defined in terms of continuity, harmony, and unity with other human beings.

Both fundamentalism and extremist rationalism encourage a closed and exclusive identity. Since their perception of truth is absolute and static, they divide the world into black and white. The adherent is urged to dissolve his or her identity into a limited and intolerant group consciousness, to forgo independent and critical judgment, and to justify aggression, even violence, against "others" as heroic. Between the extremes of individualism, absolute freedom, and the paralyzing consciousness of paradox, as versus the regressive safety and security of the fanatical dissolution of one's identity in a closed, particularistic, and exclusive group, the Bahá’í Faith chooses the adventurous path of maturity, autonomy, and independent judgment.

As follows from this inclusive identity, Bahá’í epistemology tends to encourage a culture of rationality and critical discourse. This tendency is particularly the case because Bahá’ís acknowledge the significance and validity of other points of view. Therefore, there is need for constant dialogue, both within and outside the Bahá’í community. The open and inclusive structure of Bahá’í identity makes this dialogue a possibility. Such a dialogue prevents a closed and stereotyped mentality and culture.

In a closed community where discourse is limited only to insiders, common beliefs and

assumptions tend to create a culture of closed, authoritarian, irrational, and restricted discourse. Persons within such a community take shared meanings for granted and avoid critical judgment. Gradually, a set of stereotyped ideas develops that is confirmed emotionally by the loud discourse of people who think similarly. The result is intolerance, fundamentalism, ossification, withdrawal from dynamic reality, and an impoverished culture of arrogant oversimplifications. Both the fundamentalist and extreme rationalist perspectives encourage such a closed and restricted discourse.

The Bahá'í Faith offers its followers the possibility of an open culture of critical and elaborated discourse. While the Bahá'í community has not yet realized its potential for such a glorious culture, there is gradual movement in that direction. To realize the true Bahá'í vision, however, will require a break with the intolerant aspects of the heritages of our past cultures and a more effective participation in the social, economic, cultural, and political developments of our turbulent times.

Such realized Bahá'í perspectives will lead to a responsible utopianism. By this term is intended a theoretical and practical orientation that is critical of the status quo and provides a new vision of a future social order, while yet emphasizing the relative historical, partial, and limited nature of its utopian ideals. Such a responsible utopianism combines realism and idealism. It is not content with the present order but also refuses a simplistic reduction of all human problems and difficulties to a single cause. It does not claim that its utopia is transcendent or transhistorical. On the contrary, it aims only at the realization of certain concrete potentialities of the present age, while respecting the dynamic flow of history and emphasizing the partial and relative validity of its own utopian vision.

It is clear that the Bahá'í utopia is a responsible utopia. It calls for social activism and spiritual awareness; it demands struggle in the varied dimensions of human life; it recognizes the complexity of human problems; it excepts the need for future revelations and for the rise of new utopias that will correspond to changing social and historical conditions.

By contrast, the utopian visions of both religious fundamentalism and reified rationalism (as in simplistic Marxism) demand an end to history. They share the notion that all of human suffering can be traced to a definite cause or a few definite causes that, once eliminated, will bring about a harmonious paradise on earth. Such a static vision of wish fulfillment constrains critical practice and produces intolerant normative judgments. Again, when such views hold sway, the gap between dynamic history and the simplistic utopia creates the need for repressive action, distortion of communication, and the restriction of human freedom. Utopia, in other words, is turned to the service of nightmarish repression.

Conclusion

A Bahá'í view of the relationship of faith and reason is based on the fundamental assumption of the historicity of both divine and human reason. Consequently, the Bahá'í ideology advocates a rationalism that is democratic rather than paternalistic, tolerant and inclusive rather than extremist and exclusive, and critical rather than closed or dogmatic. The significant social import of Bahá'í epistemology can be seen in its tendency to encourage democratic norms, an inclusive identity, a culture of critical discourse, and a responsible utopianism. In all these respects Bahá'í theology transcends the dogmatism of both religious fundamentalism and the myth of total reason. Such ideals hold the potential of creating a rich, complex, and open culture—a potential that should be protected from intolerant distortions derived from past cultural heritages.

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1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in Isabel Fraser, "Abdul-Baha at Clifton, England," *Star of the West* 4.1 (21 March 1913): 5.

2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada In 1912*, comp. Howard McNutt (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982) 231.

3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, trans. Laura Clifford Barney (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981) 298. The heliocentric theory held that the earth revolves around the sun; the geocentric theory, that the sun revolves around the earth.

4. See Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974) 115-16.

5. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's discussion of universal divine intellect can be found in one of His tablets quoted in *Pavam-i-Malakút*, ed. Ishragh Khavari (Tehran: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974) 72-76.

6. In Bahá’í terminology, each successive revealer of a new dispensation—that is, a founder of a new religion received from God—is a Manifestation of God.

7. A good philosophical explication of this type of hermeneutics can be found in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

8. For a brief discussion of this debate, see F. Rahman, *Islam* (New York: Anchor, 1968).

9. Qur’án 3:8-10 (trans. M. Zafrullah Khan [London: Curzon Press, 1971]). Dr. 'Alímurád Dávúdí was a Bahá’í philosopher and the secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Iran. He was killed by the Islamic Revolutionary authorities.

10. According to the voluntaristic theories of action, human action is a product of both rational and normative phenomena. Similarly, the Frankfurt school argues that history is determined by the interaction of both material and symbolic institutions.

11. See Georg Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* (New York: Free Press, 1977) and Max Weber, *The Methodology of Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1949).

12. Hegel first systematized the theory of dialectics.

13. See Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Collier, 1907) and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1947).

14. It is interesting that an emphasis on a pluralistic, historical, and relativistic approach to knowledge can be found in the recent theories of Jacques Derrida (*Writing and Difference*), Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*), Pierre Boudieu (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*), Juergen Habermas (*Knowledge and Human Interests*), Talcott Parsons (*The Structure of Social Action*), Martin Heidegger (*Being and Time*), and Gadamer (*Truth and Method*).

15. Abu Nasr Farabi, *The Perfect State: Abu Nasr Al-Farabi's Mabadiora ahl al Madina al-Fadila*, trans. Richard Walzer (Oxford, Clarendon, 1885).

16. See Avicenna, *On Theology* (London: John Murray, 1951) 42-49.

17. See G. W. F Hegel, *Philosophy and Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).

18. This theory of institutionalization can be found in Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 3 vols. (New York: Bedminster, 1968) 3: 1111-57.

19. Note that the Bahá'í sacred books consists of the revelational scriptures of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and the inspirational scriptures of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

20. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978) 20.

21. For a discussion of the world-embracing nature of the Bahá'í Faith, see Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 196–201.