

BABI-BAHA'I AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES ACADEMIC SEMINAR, June 19-21, 2015

ABSTRACTS

■ Hooshmand Badee, York St. John University, “Reconciliation between Theologians and Social Scientists in Using the Concept of ‘Spirituality’”

The word ‘spiritual’ or ‘spirituality’ constitutes an important and inseparable part of all Faiths including the Bahá’í Faith and hence it has much relevance to researchers to explore Bahá’í teachings. However, the word spiritual has been associated with multitude of meanings, religious and non-religious. There is no agreement between theologians and social scientists about the precise meaning of topics that have some relevance to the notion of spirituality such as justice and trustworthiness. This presentation explores some of the difficulties associated to the use of the term spirituality in academic research, and producing a definition that satisfy both groups.

■ Francesco Cappellari, The University of Edinburgh, “The Calligraphic Art of Mishkīn Qalam”

The aim of this paper is to offer a general overview on the calligraphy of Āqā Ḥusayn-i Iṣfahānī (1826–1912), better known under his title Mishkīn Qalam (musk-scented pen). Some light will be shed on both the technical and spiritual features of his art, underlining the symbolism of letters, as well as the symbolism of his zoomorphic and anthropomorphic calligraphic representations. Mishkīn Qalam was a prominent Bahā’ī calligrapher of 19th century Persia. Because of his religious identity, he was exiled in several cities of the Ottoman Empire. After the ascension of the Prophet-Founder of the Bahā’ī religion in 1892, Mishkīn Qalam travelled to Egypt, Damascus, India and Haifa, disseminating pieces of his calligraphic art in different Bahā’ī communities. His art is deeply rooted in the Persian ṣūfī-shī’ī calligraphic tradition, in which Mishkīn Qalam was immersed when he was a member of the Ni’matu’llāhī order before embracing the Bahā’ī faith. He married the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic calligraphic tendencies exemplified in that shī’ī artistic milieu with new concepts and symbolic references originated in the novel Bahā’ī tradition. His calligraphic works epitomise the transposition of Bahā’ī texts into images. Mystical invocations, salutations, prayers or Divine Names under his pen become roosters, celestial birds, peacocks, trees and human faces, all converging into a rich spiritual symbolism expressed in the holy texts of the new

religion. The calligraphic styles utilized by Mishkīn Qalam are the six classic cursive Arabic styles, together with the Persian (nasta’līq and shikastih) and Turkish styles (diwānī), enriched by new interpretations, elaborations and by an original usage of colours in the illumination of calligraphic panels, as exemplified by the golden celestial rooster on a radiant blue background kept at the Sackler Museum of Art at Harvard University.

■ Seena Fazel, University of Oxford, “Institutional Leanings and Emphases in Baha'i Studies over 40 Years - How They Compare with Individual Baha'i Academics, Other Small World Religions, and Broader Scholarly Trends”

This presentation will primarily examine statements about academic Baha’i studies from the institutions of the Baha’i Faith. It will outline what themes have remained constant and what has changed over the last 40 years, and how this compares with individual Baha’i academics and other prominent individual Baha’is. I will then compare this with statements from official bodies in a number of other small world religions, and, using citation trends, broader scholarly trends in academia.

■ Farshid Kazemi, The University of Edinburgh, “A Cinematic Cosmos in Process: Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā’ī, *hūrqalyā*, and Cinema”

This paper will focus on the correlation between the ontology of cinema and Shaykh Ahmad’s metaphysics of process. Included in the presentation will be a discussion of some Baha’i Writings.

■ Stephen Lambden, University of California, Merced, “Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Zayn al-Dīn al-Aḥsā’ī (d. 1241/1826) on *hūrqalyā* and its Bābī-Bahā’ī Reverberations”

The etymological roots and religio-philosophical origins of the probably originally Semitic, Abrahamic Arabic seven letter loan-word *هورقلييا* *Hūrqalyā* (=H*) have long puzzled the minds of western academic and Islamicists. H* might be paraphrased or loosely translated “luminous firmamental interworld” if its roots lie in Genesis 1: 6f where the words “The

firmament” (הַרְקִיָּא, hā-rāqīa‘) are found. Translated into Aramaic-Syriac or Mandaic this word with the adjective “elevated” attached to it might account for its probably orally transmitted Arabized linguistic form. The term was first registered by Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī (d. [executed] Aleppo 587/1191) in his Hikmat al-Ishraq (The Wisdom of Illumination”) and subsequently utilized as related to various intermediary and heavenly realms by Muhammad Bāqir Astarābādī, Mīr Dāmād (d.1041/1631) and, among others, Mullā Ṣadrā, Ṣadrā al-Dīn Shirazī, Mullā Ṣadrā (d. Basra 1050/1640).

The polymathic religio-philosophical Shi‘I thinker who became the locus of Shaykhism, Shaykh Ahmad ibn Zayn al-Dīn al-Aḥsā‘ī (d. 1241/1826), made fairly extensive use of هورقليا Hūrqalyā often along the lines of the abovementioned Ishraqī influenced thinkers. Over a more than thirty year period al-Aḥsā‘ī utilized and commented upon H* as did certain of his Shaykhi successors including Sayyid Kazim al-Husayni al-Rashti (d. 1259/1843) and Karim Khan Kirmani (d. 1871). A one-time pupil of al-Rashti, Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad, the Bab (d. 1850) hardly used or commented upon H* save in his variously titled Ṣaḥīfa fī sharḥ du‘ā al-ghayba (Treatise in Commentary on the Supplication for the Occultation [of the Hidden Imam]) where he refers to the “world of H*” in the course of reinterpreting the idea of two jisms (jismayn = “[supra-] bodies”), and two jasads (jasadayn = “[meta-] bodies”) as they are related to the world of H* (‘ālam al-hūrqalyā). Like the Bāb, Bahā’-Allāh (d. 1892) and his son and successor ‘Abd al-Bahā’ (d. 1921) hardly, if at all, mention H*. They again bypass and demythologize what they perceived as the limitations and ethereal complexities of literalistic Shi‘ī-Shaykhī latter-day expectations.

■ **Denis MacEoin, Gatestone Institute, New York, “Translating Religious Texts and the Poetry of Qurrat al- ‘Ayn”**

This will be a rambling and incoherent discourse on matters I was working on almost 40 years ago and to which I have devoted little or no attention since then. I will share some thoughts on the problems of translating religious texts, with some attention to the writings of the Bab and Baha’ Allah. Then I will look at my very extensive notes on Qurrat al-‘Ayn and my attempts at translating some of her poetry, while explaining that some of her better known verses were not written by her at all. I’ll read a couple of the poems in Persian, to convey how they work in that language, say something about the Persian poetic tradition, and read translation attempts of the poems just read. I’ll also show

some of my notes showing variants of the main poems through numerous texts, to show the difficulties of writing an annotated scholarly edition of her writings.

■ **Jack McLean, Independent Scholar, “The Place of the Heroic in the Historical Writings of Shoghi Effendi”**

Postmodernity’s deep scepticism, already foreseen in Max Weber’s prescient phrase “the disenchantment of the world”, has tended to reject the heroic as a quaint, discredited model of human behaviour. By referring to Shoghi Effendi’s treatment of early Bābī-Bahā’ī history, this paper challenges the view of British historian J.H. Plumb that heroes are created out of an outmoded, adolescent, mythological mindset and popular demand. Shoghi Effendi’s presentation of early Bābī-Bahā’ī figures, based on his reading of Nabil’s Narrative, will ensure the presence of the heroic as a defining feature of the Bābī-Bahā’ī Faith’s early historical identity.

The heroic in Shoghi Effendi’s historical writings will be explored through a theological, literary and historical framework that compares and contrasts Shoghi Effendi’s and Nabil’s treatment of the heroic to Thomas Carlyle’s prototype of the prophet as hero, and to selected features of the 19th century’s morally ambiguous romantic hero. In Shoghi Effendi’s and Nabil’s portrayals of the Bāb, Mullā Husayn, Quddūs, and Tāhirih, and in the Bābī defence of Fort Shaykh Tabarsī, the elements of stark historical realism, myth as sacred story, drama, and “tales of heroes” converge.

■ **Moojan Momen, Independent Scholar, “Memorials of the Faithful: the Democratization of Sainthood”**

This paper considers the literary genre and literary history behind Memorials of the Faithful (Tadhkiratu'l-Vafa) as well as examining what is new about the book. The paper will first consider the genre of hagiography in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It will then look at the specific literary precedent set by Faridu'd-Din's Tadhkiratu'l-Awliya (Memorials of the Saints), which is the oldest work of this genre in Persian. Finally it looks at the contents of ‘Abdu'l-Baha's book, giving some examples of the manner in which ‘Abdu'l-Baha highlights particular virtues that related to the needs of the Faith. Finally the paper will examine the manner in which ‘Abdu'l-Baha took this traditional literary format and used it in an innovative manner to make a profound statement about a fundamental principle of the World Order of Baha'u'llah.

■ **Geoffrey Nash, University of Sunderland, “The Impact of Fear and Authority on Islamic and Baha’i Modernisms in the Late Modern Age”**

Cole (1999), Scharbrodt (2008), and Alkan (2004, 2011) have discussed Islamic modernist and Baha’i orientations from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century with their emphases on nostrums such as employment of reason and science, freedom of thought, toleration, and progress. Cole and Alkan argue for the congruence of Baha’i and Young Ottoman and Young Turk thought and Scharbrodt adumbrates commonalities in the positions of Abdul Baha and the Egyptian reformers in these areas. This paper probes confluences between Islamic modernism and the Baha’i Faith and asks how their respective negotiations with modernity have enabled them to shape up to the conditions of the late modern world, especially as construed by Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991).

■ **Lil Osborn, Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford “The Baha’i Faith and the Western Esoteric Tradition, a Conflict of East & West?”**

This paper explores the apparent contradiction between the early British Baha’is who had been and immersed in the Western Esoteric traditions, in particular those surrounding Glastonbury and Celtic mythology and their interest in the Post Islamic teachings of the Baha’i Faith.

Whilst the teachings of the Bab were freighted with traditional Islamic magic, of talismans and magic squares, Baha’ullah, in fulfilling the prophecies of the Bab, went further and revealed a new post Islamic, universalist religion. His son Abdu’l Baha visited the West in 1911 and again in 1912/13, there he met with those who counted themselves as his followers, amongst them were men and women who were immersed in the esoteric and occult.

At least three of those who identified as Baha’is, Robert Felkin, Neville Meakin and Andrew Cattanach were all members of the Stella Matutina Order; Meakin also claimed the hereditary Grand Mastership of the Order of the Table Round, he attempted to initiate both Felkin and another Baha’i, Wellesley Tudor Pole, into this Order shortly before his death. Felkin would go on to take the ideas of Stella Matutina and the Order of the Table Round to New Zealand, where he established what would become the last directly linked faction to the original Golden Dawn. Pole was already enmeshed in the neo Celtic world of John Goodchild and William Sharpe; he had discovered an artefact in a well in Glastonbury which he and others believed to be of massive spiritual significance. Pole would forge another link between East and West with his lifelong quest for the origin of the artefact. He is, however, probably best remembered for his work

with another Baha’i, Alice Buckton in the in the reestablishment of Glastonbury as a spiritual centre.

Superficially ‘Abdul Baha’s remarks that:

In the past, as in the present, the Spiritual Sun of Truth has always shone from the horizon of the East. In the East Moses arose to lead and teach the people. On the Eastern horizon rose the Lord Christ. Muḥammad was sent to an Eastern nation. The Báb arose in the Eastern land of Persia. Bahá’u’lláh lived and taught in the East. All the great spiritual teachers arose in the Eastern world.

would appear to undermine their belief in the resurgence of indigenous Western Spirituality and raises the question why they didn’t seek to assert their prior understanding in a Baha’i context. Here I will outline the surprising context to the understanding of Celtic tradition which informed the understanding of Pole and others and which has important ramifications for the Baha’i Faith to the present day, that of Pole’s adherence to the British Israelite theory and links with Zionsim.

■ **Roger Prentice, “ONE GARDEN: ‘The Changeless Faith of God’ & ‘Interfaith as Inter-spiritual Living’”**

Has ‘the changeless faith of God’ as a focus of Baha’i activities been neglected, compared to ‘progressive revelation’ with a consequent reduction in our success in serving the wider community? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is astonishing on this subject. In 2002 The Universal House of Justice called on the world’s religious leaders to truly recognize Oneness. Can we say the Baha’i community has fully played its part, if it hasn’t taken full account of developments in the wider community? Have we been ‘sleeping’ whilst the Spirit of this age has raised up not ‘stones’ but illumined souls from other traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Sufism, and Taoism. I will argue that others are doing the work in which we Baha’is should be leaders. A new ‘territory’ has emerged. A ‘map’ of this new interspiritual territory is provided by Brother Wayne Teasdale in his seminal work *The Mystic Heart: Discovering Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions*. He coined the term ‘interspiritual’ but it has roots that run back through the centuries as, so I suggest, ‘the changeless Faith of God eternal in the past, eternal in the future’. In his ‘Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá’í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations’ Seena Fazel suggests dialogue via ‘three bridges’, the ethical, the intellectual and the mystic/spiritual. This presentation focuses on the third of Seena’s three bridges, the mystic/spiritual, and suggests a new approach to dialogue and to interfaith via interspiritual groups. Perhaps In the past ‘the mystic feeling’, and reality and truth, didn’t stay

long at the centre of mainstream traditions it moved to the periphery. We have a brilliant analysis of this by David Steindl Rast in his paper *The Mystical Core of Organized Religion Unlike interfaith as it is*, which can still be plagued by the disease of 'repressed exclusivity' interspirituality promises the Oneness for which the House calls. However the necessary realization requires worldview transformation and in the individual what I call the 'geddit factor'. We get it when we realize that reality doesn't lie (just) in mind, words & concepts but in nondual Mystery. From a Baha'i perspective the secret lies I suggest in these statements "the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites Man with God. – Shoghi Effendi and *The Bahá'í Faith*, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man which has first to be fed. `Abdu'l-Bahá says; I beg of God to strengthen these spiritual bonds as day followeth day, and make this mystic oneness to shine ever more brightly ... `Abdu'l-Bahá

My presentation (and associated paper, & website of resources) includes a brief interim report of a personal service project that, in retrospect, has been a 3 year 'learning laboratory', involving hundreds of people. It has produced a new model for interfaith engagement & service to the wider community. The project model is called 'One Garden: interfaith as interspiritual living'. The need to provide acceptable, nonproselytising, ways & means for people to take spiritual food is massive. Depending on the survey you use, a large number of people identify themselves as SBNR approximately 12 million in the UK, 50 million in the US. 'One Garden: interfaith as interspiritual living' is one way to make such provision and to contribute to the transformation called for by the Universal House of Justice from the world's religious leaders. However it is a community-based process not just an academic one, vital though the academic is. It's work employs the two sides of the single coin 'the changeless faith of God/'the perennial spirituality'. It does so by simply juxtaposing core teachings from the great traditions that generate truth, beauty, goodness and justice that feeds and inspires via multilayered 'spiritual dialogue'. The various teachings, combined with 'spiritual dialogue' pump sweet water for all, especially the SBNR, from several wells that are all connected to the same Source.

■ **Miklos Sarkozy, Institute of Isma'ili Studies, "Between Traveller and Pilgrim: the Perceptions of Arminius Vámbéry on Shi'ite Holy Places in Iran"**

Arminius Vámbéry the Hungarian-Jewish explorer and Orientalist had a really adventurous life. Vámbéry, a close ally of British and Ottoman political circles as well as an expert of the Turco-Iranian world had a deep personal experience on Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Disguised as a Turkish Sunni dervish (called as Rašid Efendi), Arminius Vámbéry joined a caravan in Asia Minor and at the beginning 1862 he reached Persia. Upon his arrival to Persia Vámbéry immediately would have loved to continue his journey the territory of the Central Asian Khanates. However, in Persia Vámbéry faced numerous difficulties in organizing his secret travel to Central Asia, therefore he first decided to visit the most important Iranian religious centers in Central and Southern Persia.

In 1862 Vámbéry, still disguised as a Sunni dervish joined various caravans to visit Rayy, Qom, Esfahan and Shiraz. In 1863 upon his return from Harat Vámbéry spent some time in Mashhad. During these months he became fully acquainted with all the major Shiite holy sites of Qajar Persia such as that of Imam Riza in Mashhad, the Šāh cAbd al-cAzim of Rayy, the Haram-i Hazrat-i Macsuma of Qom as well as the Šāh-i Čirāgh of Shiraz.

His later memoirs about these visits reveal a highly interesting double attitude. As it is known, Persian customs, Shiite religious sentiments were often in the focus of sharp criticism of Vámbéry, who, as a pro-Ottoman partisan and pro-British character, regarded Qajar Persia as an example of moral debauchery. On the other hand, aspects of pilgrimage, emotional descriptions of Shiite holy sites as well as his meetings with high-ranking Shiite religious clergy clearly suggest a much more enthusiastic and often mystical approach by Vámbéry.

Thus one can discover a unique attitude in his travelogue concerning Shiite holy sites of Iran, where aspects of a Western explorer and a pious Muslim pilgrim are often intermingled.