Why I Am a Bahá'í

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> The Great Being saith: O ye children of men! The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men.[1]
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> The purpose of religion is the acquisition of praiseworthy virtues, the betterment of morals, the spiritual development of mankind, the real life and divine bestowals.[2]

This vision provided by Bahá'í scripture of the purpose of religion shows its dual dimensions: as a mechanism both for the transformation of the social, collective life of humanity and for the refinement and growth of the individual's personal, inner, spiritual self. The development of one informs the development of the other, according to the Bahá'í teachings. The Bahá'í vision of the world as a God-centred, united, peaceful, globally functioning organism, wherein each individual is enabled to develop his or her own potential – materially, spiritually, intellectually and emotionally – to the highest degree, and in which people are valued individually and collectively for the unique contributions they can make to the greater good of the whole – this vision I find enormously satisfying. Faith, of course, is not entirely dependent on personal satisfaction or a feeling of 'rightness' but in examining one's reasons for committing oneself to a particular religion or way of life, this surely must be an important factor.

A whole host of questions arises when one reflects on just why one belongs to a particular religion. Why belong to a religion at all? What is the purpose of religion? What does one expect from religion – for oneself, for the world? Should we expect anything? What is my religion's view of the universe? How does it make sense of the physical world, the spiritual world, the afterlife, the fact of other religions? What does it say of the nature of God, if there is one? What does it say about other people and how we are to relate to them? Does it say anything about these things or should it? Is my religion concerned solely with the inner life or does it have a social programme? How does it say the inner transformation informs the outer person? Does it have teachings to effect this? How does it fit in with other religions? Is there a historical connection among them? What are the central issues? Does it go some way towards answering the age-old, persistent questions of life: what is our purpose on earth? How did we get here? Where are we going? How

do we get there? And just what is it all about, anyway?

My commitment to the Bahá'í faith arises out of the answers it gives to these questions and others. But perhaps more importantly, I am committed to the religion of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–92) because I see the effect of its teachings working in the world, on me and my family and friends as well as in the wider community. Again, I do not suggest that one's commitment to a religion is determined solely by the effectiveness of its teachings, but if we agree that one purpose of religion is to enable a person to draw nearer to the Creator and to co-exist happily and purposefully with others, then religious teachings that foster this end are, to say the least, compelling.

I believe all religions can do this. Why, then, be a Bahá'í and not something else?

I explain this as a believer. My explanation is coloured by the Bahá'í teachings themselves. I see the world, the universe, the nature of religion in a particular way – this particular way – *because* I believe Bahá'u'lláh's explanation of these things to be 'right'. I find it difficult to divorce myself, my thoughts, from what Bahá'u'lláh teaches. His vision is so compelling that it is my vision. Nevertheless, I will try to analyse just why I am Bahá'í.

One of the prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, one I say every day, begins:

> I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.[3]

The daily recitation of this statement of the purpose of my life provides me with guidance and direction, grounds me and gives me a sense of where I am in relation to the whole of creation. Perhaps others do not need to have a sense of purpose but I find this vital to my well-being and ability to function in the world.

Of the nature of this God who we are to come to know and to love, Bahá'u'lláh says:

> So perfect and comprehensive is His creation that no mind nor heart, however keen or pure, can ever grasp the nature of the most insignificant of His creatures; much less fathom the mystery of Him Who is the Day Star of Truth, Who is the invisible and unknowable Essence.[4]

The perplexing question of how one can come to know a God who is in His essence unknowable is, for me, answered by the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh says:

> Far, far from Thy glory be what mortal man can affirm of Thee, or attribute unto Thee, or the praise with which he can glorify Thee! Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be

> enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.[5]

Therefore, coming to know myself, to understand who *I* am, gives me some understanding of this God who created us in His image. Further, I believe we come to know God through those He sends to us, those precious individuals chosen by God to impart to us His will, those whom Bahá'ís call Manifestations of God. These Manifestations, whose ranks include Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad and Bahá'u'lláh, as well as others, manifest the qualities of God most perfectly:

> The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself. Whoso turneth away from them, hath turned away from God, and whoso disbelieveth in them, hath disbelieved in God. Every one of them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of His Truth unto every one in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. They are the Manifestations of God amidst men, the evidences of His Truth, and the signs of His glory.[6]

Therefore, coming to know, love and obey the Manifestation of God in the day in which He appears is, for me, another way of coming to know and to love God.

Beyond this, I look at God's creation, at nature, at the visible universe, and am awed by His handiwork. Bahá'u'lláh says that every created thing has been endowed by God with some of His attributes:

> Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes.[7]

By studying nature, then, I can come to know something of God. However, Bahá'u'lláh goes on to add:

> Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self.[8]

So coming to know and understand other people is another way I can come to know and love God.

This explanation of the nature of God and how to come to know Him that is provided by the Bahá'í writings is one of the main pillars propping up my commitment to the Bahá'í faith.

These statements of Bahá'u'lláh, with others, provide insights into the answers to the questions I posed above. Particularly they explain the universe, how it came to be, why it is and how I fit into it. Further, they point to the connectedness of all things: the physical universe to the world of the spirit, people one to the other, ideas to objects, thoughts to events. In short, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings provide me with a cosmology at once comprehensive and comprehensible. Through them I can make sense of the universe.

Another of my questions was also answered by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings: how can one explain the existence of various religions? My father is a Jew, my mother's family Christian, my husband's roots are in Islam. Then there is my cousin's wife, whose background is Buddhist, and my brother-in-law's mother, whose family followed a traditional Amerindian religion.

Some religionists explain the existence of these different paths by seeing in them the work of a devil, leading humankind astray; others, more charitable, see them as the prompting of the human spirit to come to know its God. As a child I found the diversity of religious traditions in my own family a normal aspect of life. Only as a youth did questions arise: which one is right? If only one is right, why does God allow the others to exist? Since they all seem to be saying more or less the same things, why are there so many?

Again, in the Bahá'í faith I found a reasonable and satisfying explanation, one that made more sense than any other explanation I had come across:

> Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.[9]

> In thine esteemed letter thou hadst inquired which of the Prophets of God should be regarded as superior to others. Know thou assuredly that the essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the same. Their unity is absolute. God, the Creator, saith: There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message. They all have but one purpose; their secret is the same secret. To prefer one in honour to another, to exalt certain ones above the rest, is in no wise to be permitted. Every true Prophet hath regarded His Message as fundamentally the same as the

> Revelation of every other Prophet gone before Him . . . The measure of the revelation of the Prophets of God in this world, however, must differ. Each and every one of them hath been the Bearer of a distinct Message, and hath been commissioned to reveal Himself through specific acts. It is for this reason that they appear to vary in their greatness . . . It is clear and evident, therefore, that any apparent variation in the intensity of their light is not inherent in the light itself, but should rather be attributed to the varying receptivity of an ever-changing world . . . God's purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established.[10]

Often Bahá'ís describe this process of progressive revelation through the analogy of the child going to school. The child passes through the different levels of the education system progressively and systematically. The lessons learned in the first year are the foundation for all later lessons. That the first-year teacher teaches a simpler form of mathematics than the second-year teacher says nothing about the knowledge and ability of the teacher but a lot about the ability and level of attainment of the student. God sends His divine teachers or Manifestations to reveal more and more about Himself and His plan for us.

That the forms of religions differ is also explained in the Bahá'í teachings: while the fundamental teachings of the different Manifestations of God are the same, the way in which they are applied differs according to the age in which the teacher appears. This also made sense to me. For example, all the Manifestations teach that justice is an important personal and social quality to develop. However, justice today looks very different from its form four thousand years ago. Today we find alternatives to taking the eye of the criminal who takes the eye of his victim, alternatives more in keeping with our concepts of what is 'civilized' or 'humane'. These very concepts have been informed by the development of religious principles brought by the Manifestations, for instance the tempering of justice with mercy or the need to re-educate as well as punish the criminal.

Beyond these differences are the varying forms of worship, practices and rituals. These are similarly explained as different approaches to the same desire – to worship and remember God. That they differ owes much to cultural expressions of devotion, as when Bahá'ís look to the scriptures of other religions they find that there is little in them to uphold the complex forms that have developed.

Bahá'u'lláh's perspective on the panoply of religions was both convincing and cogent to one who had lived happily for years among good people of different faith-traditions. His explanations opened my eyes to the common ground that is to be found among all people of faith and enabled me to make sense of what was otherwise a jumble of religious beliefs.

Again, it was the circumstances of my own family that convinced me of the soundness of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching of the oneness of the human race. Racial and ethnic differences, like religious ones, abound in my family: blacks, whites, Amerindians, Hispanics, Asians, Europeans, Middle Easterners, going back three generations. My own family is a microcosm of the world; I, my children, my brothers and sisters, my nieces and nephews reflect the diversity of the world's people. It would be impossible for me to give my allegiance to a religion that teaches racial or ethnic superiority or any form of nationalism. To find in the Bahá'í writings this statement of Bahá'u'lláh was a confirmation of something I had personally experienced and knew to be true.

> It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.[11]

The Bahá'í writings, which are replete with references to this basic tenet of the religion, often use images drawn from the natural world:

> Ye are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean.[12]

That the human race is essentially one is a fundamental statement of reality for Bahá'ís. However, it is accepted that at present we do not act as if this were the case. Thus the Bahá'í writings exhort us to behave in ways which demonstrate our oneness and which will enable us to build a united world more suited to the purpose given us by God:

> Let your hearts reflect the glories of the Sun of Truth in their many colours to gladden the eye of the divine Cultivator Who has nourished them. Day by day become more closely attracted in order that the love of God may illumine all those with whom you come in contact. Be as one spirit, one soul, leaves of one tree, flowers of one garden, waves of one ocean.
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> As difference in degree of capacity exists among human souls, as difference in capability is found, therefore, individualities will differ one from another. But in reality this is a reason for unity and not for discord and enmity. If the flowers of a garden were all of one colour, the effect would be monotonous to the eye; but if the colours are variegated, it is most pleasing and wonderful.
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> The difference in adornment of colour and capacity of reflection among the flowers gives the garden its beauty and charm. Therefore, although we are of different individualities, different in ideas and of various fragrances, let us strive like flowers of the same divine garden to live together in harmony. Even though each soul has its own individual perfume and colour,

> all are reflecting the same light, all contributing fragrance to the same breeze which blows through the garden, all continuing to grow in complete harmony and accord. Become as waves of one sea, trees of one forest, growing in the utmost love, agreement and unity.[13]

Far from leaving us with an idealized vision of a happy, united, peace-loving world and exhortations on how to achieve it, I find that the Bahá'í writings provide practical guidance on those steps that we as individuals and as communities must take in order to realize this aim. The adoption by the people of the world of a universal auxiliary language, of a uniform standard of weights, measures and currencies and of global institutions of governance are but a few concrete examples of the measures that are to be taken to effect the unification of the planet. For the individual, it is recognized that certain personal attitudes need to be acquired and others discarded. Bahá'u'lláh, for instance, calls for the abandonment of all forms of prejudice and stances of superiority. On the other hand, He calls for the recognition of the equality of women and men, for the realization that the truths of religion and of science are but aspects of one truth, and for an understanding of the fundamental oneness of God's religions.

That a religion should provide such specific advice on issues that might appear to be more political than spiritual is, to me, important. Many creeds inform the inner person, guide the individual on his or her way to God, but are short on advice on how to transform spiritual truths into social actions. For me, one purpose of religion surely must be to make the world a better place in which to live. My observation of people in many parts of the world, holding different religious ideas, is that we generally find it difficult to see the connection between those things that will 'get us to heaven' and our day-to-day lives here on earth. For me, the Bahá'í faith makes this connection. It says that one's personal salvation is bound up with the salvation of the world. Hence Bahá'u'lláh forbids monasticism, requiring His followers to face the challenges of the secular world as well as those of the spirit. Indeed, to the extent that 'our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendour of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh',[14] will the world we live in be transformed; that is, God proffers the guidance, we must take it up and apply it.

No doubt some will disagree with the Bahá'í view that one purpose of religion is to effect positive social development. Many believe that as life on earth is ephemeral there is little point in trying to improve it; rather, what we must do is fix our gaze on the next world and try to be accepted there. What I find interesting in the Bahá'í perspective is how one's spiritual development, convictions, thoughts and deeds are seen to be connected and how the application of these on this earthly plane affects one's progress in the next world. Since the Bahá'í faith teaches that we are already in eternity, our progress after the death of our physical bodies is a natural and inevitable event. However, we can make progress more quickly and

easily if in this world we have 'packed the spiritual luggage' we need. Thus the acquisition of spiritual characteristics and virtues such as trustworthiness, generosity, kindness and patience are valuable both in the physical world and in the next. The development of these virtues is seen by Bahá'ís to be a fundamental purpose of one's life on earth.

I find the analogy of the baby in the womb to be a helpful way to think about this:

> Consider how a being, in the world of the womb, was deaf of ear and blind of eye, and mute of tongue; how he was bereft of any perceptions at all. But once, out of that world of darkness, he passed into this world of light, then his eye saw, his ear heard, his tongue spoke. In the same way, once he hath hastened away from this mortal place into the Kingdom of God, then he will be born in the spirit; then the eye of his perception will open, the ear of his soul will hearken, and all the truths of which he was ignorant before will be made plain and clear.
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> An observant traveller passing along a way will certainly recall his discoveries to mind, unless some accident befall him and efface the memory.[15]

Thus, just as the foetus acquires physical characteristics the value of which is only fully realized once the child dies to the womb world and is born into this, so the spiritual characteristics one strives to acquire here are perhaps not fully appreciated until one dies from this world and is 'born' into the next. To take the analogy further, the physical characteristics developed by the foetus appear not only to be useless to it, but even detrimental, in that the functionless arms and legs restrict freedom of movement; so too the spiritual attributes of, for instance, honesty and loyalty can appear to be unnecessary and restrictive. And just as an embryo that does not develop some part of its body has disabilities in this life, so too is the soul that fails to acquire spiritual qualities here hampered in the next life. The analogy is limited, however, in the sense that the foetus cannot decide for itself whether or not to acquire its arms and legs, whereas in this life we must make the decision to acquire spiritual attributes and then act so as to develop them. The Bahá'í explanation of the relationship between this world and the next is, for me, both logical and satisfying as it links positive action here with spiritual progress both in this world and the next.

Many are alarmed by the prospect of their own death. The explanation of Bahá'u'lláh about the nature of the next world and our condition in it has enabled me, for the most part, to overcome this fear. This passage, penned by Bahá'u'lláh in answer to a question about the nature and progress of the soul after death, provides an insight into God's love for us which both gives me joy and draws me closer to Him:

> Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal His loving kindness and bounty. The movement of My Pen is stilled when it attempteth to befittingly describe the loftiness and glory of so exalted a station. The honour with which the Hand of Mercy will invest the soul is such as no tongue can adequately reveal, nor any other earthly agency describe. Blessed is the soul which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the peoples of the world. Such a soul liveth and moveth in accordance with the Will of its Creator, and entereth the all-highest Paradise. The Maids of Heaven, inmates of the loftiest mansions, will circle around it, and the Prophets of God and His chosen ones will seek its companionship. With them that soul will freely converse, and will recount unto them that which it hath been made to endure in the path of God, the Lord of all worlds. If any man be told that which hath been ordained for such a soul in the worlds of God, the Lord of the throne on high and of earth below, his whole being will instantly blaze out in his great longing to attain that most exalted, that sanctified and resplendent station . . . The nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men. The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth. The purpose underlying Their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High . . . The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother. When the soul attaineth the Presence of God, it will assume the form that best befitteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation. Such an existence is a contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as the former is preceded by a cause, whilst the latter is independent thereof. Absolute existence is strictly confined to God, exalted be His glory. Well is it with them that apprehend this truth.[16]

Thus for me the Bahá'í faith provides a vision not only of this world but of the worlds to come. Its answers to those age-old questions are clear and logical yet draw on the profound spiritual truths that, it teaches, have always existed and will always do so.

Notes

1. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 215.
2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 152.
3. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), no. CLXXXI, p. 314.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 62. In the remainder of this stirring passage Bahá'u'lláh goes on to explain how exalted God is above the comprehension of His creation:

> The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man's finite mind and are conditioned by its limitations. . . From time immemorial He hath been veiled in the ineffable sanctity of His exalted Self, and will everlastingly continue to be wrapt in the impenetrable mystery of His unknowable Essence. Every attempt to attain to an understanding of His inaccessible Reality hath ended in complete bewilderment, and every effort to approach His exalted Self and envisage His Essence hath resulted in hopelessness and failure.
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> How bewildering to me, insignificant as I am, is the attempt to fathom the sacred depths of Thy knowledge! How futile my efforts to visualize the magnitude of the power inherent in Thine handiwork – the revelation of Thy creative power! How can mine eye, which hath no faculty to perceive itself, claim to have discerned Thine Essence, and how can mine heart, already powerless to apprehend the significance of its own potentialities, pretend to have comprehended Thy nature? How can I claim to have known Thee, when the entire creation is bewildered by Thy mystery, and how can I confess not to have known Thee, when, lo, the whole universe proclaimeth Thy Presence and testifieth to Thy truth? The portals of Thy grace have throughout eternity been open, and the means of access unto Thy Presence made available, unto all created things, and the revelations of Thy matchless Beauty have at all times been imprinted upon the realities of all beings, visible and invisible. Yet, notwithstanding this most gracious favour, this perfect and consummate bestowal, I am moved to testify that Thy court of holiness and glory is immeasurably exalted above the knowledge of all else besides Thee, and the mystery of Thy Presence is inscrutable to every mind except Thine own. No one except Thyself can unravel the secret of Thy nature, and naught else but Thy transcendental Essence can grasp the reality of Thy unsearchable being. (*Gleanings*, pp. 62–4)

5. Ibid., pp. 4–5.
6. Ibid., pp. 49–50.
7. Ibid., p. 65.
8. Ibid.
9. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 58.
10. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 78–80.
11. Ibid., p. 250.
12. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 27.
13. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 24.
14. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 66.
15. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 177.
16. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 155–6.