

The Baha'i Faith—Part Four

By Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon

The Manifestations and the Nature of God (con't)

What is the nature of the Baha'i prophet or Manifestation? He is seen as divine in that he reflects the divine nature, but he is not God, only a revealer and servant of God. He reflects or even contains the divine attributes, but he is ultimately only a divinely enlightened human. In other words, the prophet is a combination of the human and in some sense the divine, but ultimately only a very special man.

Baha'u'llah's mysticism led to declarations about the prophet that did not always clarify matters. On the one hand, he asserted they are *not* incarnations of God: "Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men." ³⁴ But then he spoke more forcefully in terms of their divine nature. Apparently referring to himself: "Unto this subtle, this mysterious and ethereal Being [Baha'u'llah] He [God] hath assigned a twofold nature; the physical, pertaining to the world of matter, and the spiritual, *which is born of the substance of God Himself...* 'Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. *I am He, Himself and He is I, Myself*; except that I am that I am and He is that He is.'" ³⁵

Baha'u'llah alleges that the Bab declared of him, "There is none other God but Him." ³⁶ Baha'u'llah also says unashamedly, "When I contemplate, O My God, the relationship that bindeth me to Thee... I am moved to proclaim to all created things, *'verily I am God!'*; and when I consider my own self, lo, I find it coarser than clay." ³⁷ Nevertheless, the rationalistic influence in modern Baha'i theology, as well as its Islamic roots, dictate that the prophet cannot be deity, and this is the official teaching.

And there are other difficulties. Baha'u'llah attempted to distinguish between the prophets' *station* (rank) and *mission*. As to their station, the prophets are all equal in an absolute sense. "No distinction do We make between any of His Messengers"; they "are regarded as one soul and the same person." ³⁸ They all have the same value, even though the most recent Manifestation supersedes the others in importance by means of progressive or superior revelation. As to the prophets' mission, however, "the words and utterances ... appear to diverge and differ... [still] all their utterances are, in reality, but the expressions of one Truth." ³⁹ Even though their teachings *appear* as contradictory, they really aren't because all the prophets "are regarded as one soul and the same person" giving revelation from the one and same God. Supposedly then, in the end, Krishna, a polytheist, and Jesus, a monotheist, are One, despite their vast theological differences, not to mention natures. Buddha and Muhammad are One, despite Buddha's practical atheism and Muhammad's zealous theism.

The problem with a mystic is that one does not always know when to take him literally, but we assume literalness was not the intent when Baha'u'llah stated: "Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: 'I am God,' He, verily, speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto." ⁴⁰ Certainly the biblical Abraham or Moses (or Buddha or the Muslim Muhammad) would react with horror to such an expression literally meant. Regard-

less, this statement still cannot be reconciled with the teachings of Abraham, Muhammad, Buddha, Moses or Jesus, for it is also implying that all the Manifestations were God-sent and God-empowered to teach Baha'i truths, "truths" which these other religions deny. In effect, the Baha'i Achilles heel is that nothing they can ever do will justify their approach to comparative religion, at least not if we examine religious scriptures frankly and let words mean what they say. Unfortunately, verbal clarity of expression is not the goal of a mystic who wishes to unify all religions into his own personal truth.

Baha'is may respond to these problems by declaring that the prophets' progressive revelation is only relative and that therefore no prophet has ever denied an absolute truth of another prophet. But if all revelation is relative, no absolute truth exists and Baha'i claims to absolute truth are spurious:

The problem with this concept of revelation is that it is self-defeating. The statement, "revelation is relative," which is allegedly a revelation spoken by Baha'u'llah, must be either relative or absolute. If the statement is relative, it is not absolutely binding, and it is possible that absolute revelation does exist. If the statement, "revelation is relative," is absolute, then the statement, "revelation is relative," cannot be true. Thus, the Baha'i doctrine of relative revelation is self-defeating and untrue. ⁴¹

Further, we know with certainty what the basic doctrines of the major world religions are. The Baha'i faith is wrong to declare that the real differences among religions are in outer form and ritual and not in fundamental doctrine. In fact, almost all religions, more or less, are similar in outer form and ritual but distinct in doctrine. No orthodox Christian, Muslim or Jew, for example, would accept Krishna or Buddha as prophets of God. No orthodox Buddhist or Muslim could ever accept Jesus as the atoning Savior and Son of God. Only if Baha'i can presuppose religious unity by *discarding* the teachings of the prophets can it find a way to "harmonize" fundamentally contrary faiths. Unfortunately for Baha'i, the horse was dead at the gate. Prophets who collectively contradict one another on essential doctrinal teachings have nothing to say to anyone. And at that point it is then impossible to determine *any* religious truth from them. All that can remain from the Baha'i approach to religion is skepticism and agnosticism. As Francis Beckwith points out in his study *Baha'i*:

Though Shoghi Effendi has said that the manifestations disagree on "non-essential aspects of their doctrine," it would stretch credibility to the limit to suppose that the nature of God is one of these non-essential aspects. God cannot be impersonal, personal, transcendent, polytheistic, pantheistic, monotheistic, able to beget, not able to beget, relevant, and irrelevant all at the same time. If it is true that God is all those things, then we are driven to agnosticism. Such an illogical God can never be known based on the contradictory information given to us by His alleged manifestations. Irreconcilable data gives us no knowledge of God whatsoever. ⁴²

In order to be fair to any world religious leader, one should accept what the leader says at face value, instead of twisting it in order to fit a predetermined belief. In other words, if the leader says, "I am a sinner," or "I have failed God," this must be accepted. It should not be distorted in order to fit a particular prejudice of the reader (such in the case of 'Abdu'l-Baha—"the manifestations never sin"). The burden of proof is on the Baha'i leaders to justify their interpretation. Since they have not done so, we must accept what has been written at face value. This is the only honest and fair way to read any given text.

It could be said, without fear of contradiction, that the religious leaders who the Baha'i faith believes to be manifestations, are "authorities" with wax noses—noses

which can be twisted in any way the Baha'i apologist sees fit, in order to keep his religious beliefs "consistent." ⁴³

Thus, in the following quotation, note that the basic message that Baha'u'llah communicates is of *not* listening to the meaning of the prophet's words themselves. His teaching is that, regardless of how contradictory the prophets' words are, all of them must be seen as valid regardless! Baha'u'llah declares of the Manifestations what any first year comparative religion major would know is false: "If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith.... Who so maketh the slightest possible difference between their persons, their words, their messages, their acts and manners, hath indeed disbelieved in God, hath repudiated His signs, and betrayed the Cause of His Messengers." ⁴⁴

The truth is that the Baha'i prophets have not simply amended or expanded the *minor* teachings of the prophets before them; they have *rejected* the major teachings. For example, how could the Buddha "establish the Oneness of God" when he didn't even believe in God? ⁴⁵ Buddhism actually nullified Hinduism (there is no absolute deity); Islam "nullified" Christianity ("God has no Son"); Baha'i nullified Islam (Muhammad is not the final prophet). How then can the prophets be prophets of the *same* God? Further, why do Baha'is maintain that *their* faith is the one being misrepresented? Where have Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Jews misrepresented Baha'i? Is not the reverse true, and is it not their own personal religious biases and intolerance that cause them to claim misrepresentation?

Essentially, then, it is hardly unexpected to discover Baha'is stressing their basic ideals to potential converts, such as world peace and brotherhood, rather than an actual study of different religions to prove their alleged unity.

Yet in order to maintain their superior status, Baha'is emphasize that they are neither eclectic nor syncretistic. Incredibly, Sabet declares that such an idea is "historically incorrect and unfounded in substance.... Baha'u'llah's teaching is not syncretic." ⁴⁶ But isn't the dictionary definition of syncretism, "the attempt or tendency to combine or reconcile differing beliefs, as in philosophy or religion"? Baha'is must adopt a circular argument, assuming the truth of what is argued. Supposedly, Baha'i is not syncretistic because it presupposes the truth that all religions are One. So how can it be syncretistic: Baha'i is only teaching the original truth of all religion. Unenlightened people and their false doctrines and interpretations of their scriptures have clouded the primordial unity. ⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, in "Baha'i Houses of Worship the Holy Scriptures must not be interpreted by the word of man," ⁴⁸ and no sermons are ever given on the Holy Books. As a result, Baha'is remain safe in their world of religious "unity."

Undoubtedly, having an infallible interpreter or spokesman that proclaims "all religions are one" by fiat solves many difficulties, but it also denies the individual his fundamental right to examine "God's Word" to make up his or her own mind as to what it teaches. If we truly accept the idea of an independent investigation of the truth, then we may expect that, with reverent and objective study, we will not fall prey to *another's* false interpretation. As there can be no more vital a topic than the Word of God, no one should have the right to deny another person the opportunity of determining what God does or does not say. God places no premium on credulity (Proverbs 14:15) or ignorance (Hosea 4:1, 6; 2 Timothy 2:15). Giving infallible authority to one person or governing body may "solve" problems for those in power, but the problems it creates for the laity are far more serious.

Thus, if we take a critical look at the teachings of the Bab, Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha and modern Baha'i writers, we find not only anti-Christian, anti-Islamic, anti-Buddhist and anti-Hindu teachings but also serious internal problems for the Baha'i member. There are numerous false biblical interpretations, and many denials of earlier proclaimed infallible truths. Such basic errors are inconsistent with the divine nature. For God to be unknowable is one thing; for Him to change His mind every time He manifests, for Him to pronounce error and misinterpret His own Scripture, is another thing entirely. What kind of God is this?

Just as many people would rather be in the company of an honest sinner than a hypocritical saint, so they would rather have an honest disunity in religion that is respectful of other people's religions beliefs than a contrived unity that is disrespectful to other people's religious beliefs and undermines them by stealth, all the while claiming friendship. The Baha'i approach to Christianity illustrates this problem clearly.

Notes:

34. Abdu'l-Baha, *Baha'i World Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 20.
35. Shoghi Effendi, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976), pp. 66-67, emphasis added.
36. Abid Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah Adrianople 1866-68* (Oxford: George Ronald), p. 146, citing *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (p. 141).
37. *Ibid.*, p. 80 citing Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 113, emphasis added.
38. *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 50-51.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
40. *Baha'i World Faith*, p. 24.
41. Francis Beckwith, *Baha'i* (Bethany, 1985), pp. 20-21.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
44. *Baha'i World Faith*, pp. 20-28.
45. Abdu'l-Baha, *Christ's Promise Fulfilled* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978), p. 71.
46. For example, cf. Huschmand Sabet, *The Heavens are Cleft Asunder* (Oxford, England: George Ronald, 1973), pp. 48-49.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 49.