

# THE CENTRALITY OF THE IDEA OF GOD IN RELIGION: A COMPARISON OF MANICHAISM AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

---

Drake H. M. Kaiser<sup>†</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Swedenborg, in *Divine Love and Wisdom* 13, writes:

How important it is to have a correct idea of God can be known from the truth that the idea of God constitutes the inmost of thought with all who have religion, for all things of religion and all things of worship look to God.

Helen Keller, in her work *My Religion*, re-expresses this concept beautifully:

Most human minds are so constituted that there is in them a secret chamber where theological subjects are stored, and its centre is the idea of God. If this idea is false and cruel, all things which follow it by logical sequence partake of these qualities. For the highest is also the inmost, and it is the very essence of every belief and thought and institution derived from it.<sup>1</sup>

This Swedenborgian concept can be demonstrated by comparing two religions that are strikingly similar in doctrine, yet radically different in actual dogma and practice—namely, Manichaeism and the Bahá'í faith.

Of course, there are many factors that explain the differences between these. For instance, the advent of Islam between the times of the religions' respective founders, Mani (216-277 A.D.) and Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892 A.D.),

---

<sup>†</sup>Present address: 5811 Mesa Drive, Apt. 624, Austin, TX 79731. E-mail: drakehmk@aol.com.

<sup>1</sup>Helen Keller, *My Religion*, 1956 edition (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc., 1956), 82.

makes the historical situation, political environment, and religious circumstances in which the two religions arose very different. Nevertheless, New Church theology and examination demonstrate that differences between the two religions derive directly from divergent ideas of God. First, however, the similarities will be examined.

### SIMILARITIES

The Manichaeans and the Bahá'ís have many similarities: for instance, they both originated in Persia; they both insist on universal religion and consequently demonstrate some syncretism (the combining, uniting, or reconciling of different and divergent religious beliefs); and they share similar concepts of divine revelation.

The two founders, Mani (Manichaeism) and Bahá'u'lláh (Bahá'ís) say virtually the same things about themselves. Both profess: to have received direct divine revelation; to have been appointed as God's messenger; and to be the latest in the line of prophets. Thus, both claim their revelations act as the intermediary or link between the Transcendent God and the human world.

Mani and Bahá'u'lláh both apparently derive their self-concepts from ancient Persian ideas. One scholar observes that, "Monotheistic messengership grew out of an ancient tradition of direct intermediation prevalent throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East."<sup>2</sup> These messengers show a definite pattern:

- God chooses the messenger (who did not previously seek appointment), and guides him; the chosen one is therefore an instrumental messenger.
- The messenger polarizes his audience.
- The messenger brings both good tidings for the righteous and stern warning for the wicked.

---

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Robinson Waldman, "Nubuwah" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 11:1.

- The messenger's actions are irreproachable, and he possesses exemplary characteristics like devotion, compassion, and faith.
- To reject or ignore the messenger is considered tantamount to refusing and disregarding God.<sup>3</sup>

Mani arose in Persia in a time when the area was a crossing ground for intellectual and religious ideas from both East and West. This gave Mani access to Judaism, Syrian (Gnostic or Nestorian) Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and indigenous Persian folk religion, as well as some Buddhism and Hinduism. Mani's religion contains elements from all of these.

Mani's religious experiences lead him to found a universal Gnostic religion—a religion that believes it possesses a special knowledge (*gnosis*) that leads to salvation. He tried to incorporate the religions founded by those prophets he considered his predecessors, like Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus. For instance, Mani asserted that Jesus Christ had come into the world to restore light and banish darkness, but His apostles perverted and destroyed His doctrine; Mani proclaimed himself to be the *Paraclete* (Messenger or Comforter foretold in *John* 14:16) sent by God to restore the integrity of the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

Mani even went so far as to declare himself to be the "Seal of the Prophets"; his revelation would surpass that of his predecessors because it would be for all peoples, and no further revelation need be given. He acknowledges the other prophets' relative truth, but he alone could provide the absolute truth.<sup>5</sup> If people of other religious traditions disagreed, Mani ascribed it to their flagrant misinterpretation or falsification of their own religions.<sup>6</sup> Despite fierce persecution from Christians, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and later from Muslims, Mani's religion was amazingly successful and spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. Although it

---

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Ivor H. Evans, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, revised centenary edition (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), 707.

<sup>5</sup>Geo Widengren, *Mani and Manichaeism*, trans. Charles Kessler (London: Weidengeld and Nicolson, 1965), 143.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 124.

remained small, it endured for more than a thousand years, until the thirteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

Mani's teachings about divine revelation became highly influential. For instance, scholars maintain:

Research has...established distinct echoes of the Manichaeen doctrine in Mohammed's preaching and especially his interpretation of revelation. It is, however, improbable that Allah's apostle had any personal acquaintance with the Manichee religion.<sup>8</sup>

These echoes grow louder within the Bahá'í Faith.

Like Mani, the Bahá'ís' founder arose in Persia, but in his time the dominant intellectual and religious influence was (and still is) Islam, particularly Shi'ism. The Shi'ites await the coming of a great leader, the twelfth Imam, who will restore peace to the world and establish true Islam among all peoples. In the midnineteenth century, a man named Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad (1819-1850) started a religious/political revolutionary movement; he became known as the Bab (gate) because his followers believed he was the gateway to the hidden twelfth Imam. The Bab, before his execution in 1850, announced that the coming of the twelfth Imam was immanent, and on April 21, 1863, his follower Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri announced that he was this coming one—"he whom God shall manifest."<sup>9</sup> He then changed his name to Bahá'u'lláh (the Glory of God).

Like Mani, Bahá'u'lláh's religious experiences convinces him that he is a Manifestation of God, and he too claims to be the latest (but in this case not the last) in a great line of Universal Prophets or Manifestations. (This prestigious line includes Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and the Bab.) Bahá'u'lláh recognizes the other prophets' truth (although some of their preaching is outdated), and while not claiming absolute truth, he still maintains that his revelation is the clearest to have come: a crown of revelations.

---

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Quispel, "Gnosticism from Its Origins to the Middle Ages" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 5: 572.

<sup>8</sup> Widengren, 127.

<sup>9</sup> Alessandro Bausani, "Baha'is" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 2: 40.

Like Mani and his followers, Bahá'u'lláh and the Bahá'ís have had to endure fierce persecutions, especially in Islamic countries. However, their religion has grown and spread phenomenally, and today it is the world's second most widely spread religion (next to Christianity).

Mani and Bahá'u'lláh share some other characteristics. For instance, both draw heavily from their respective religious and intellectual backgrounds. In Mani's case, scholars do not seem able to pinpoint what his primary influence was. One scholar writes:

We can assert that Manichaeism has its roots in the Iranian religious tradition and that its relationship to Mazdaism, or Zoroastrianism, is more or less like that of Christianity to Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

However, another scholar maintains:

Mani was undoubtedly a syncretist, but his religious background was predominantly Judaeo-Christian, as is revealed by the newly discovered texts. The view once commonly held of him fusing together elements of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism to create a world religion which was all things to all men must now be decisively abandoned...the Zoroastrian and Buddhist elements were acquired in the course of mission and were not fundamental to Manichaeism.<sup>11</sup>

Mani, famous for his syncretism, appears to have specifically adapted his religion to those he was trying to convert. For instance, Manichaean pantheons assimilated local gods,<sup>12</sup> and Manichaeans used the Old Testament to convert former Jews and Christians, while using other scriptures like the Sibyl oracles to convert pagans.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Gherardo Gnoli, "Manichaeism: An Overview" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 9: 165.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel N. Lieu, *Manichaeism: In the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 53-54.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Widengren, 124.

Bahá'u'lláh draws heavily from his Shi'ite environment (although this is not always clear to Bahá'í converts from non-Islamic countries). For instance, the Bahá'í Faith clearly draws on the Islamic theory of divine (progressive) revelation, *sharí'a* (an all encompassing ethical, legal, and social system that regulates every level of society), and covenant.<sup>14</sup> Bahá'u'lláh also frequently quotes the New Testament and Sufí writers.<sup>15</sup> Although Bahá'u'lláh was not as blatantly syncretistic as Mani, he goes to lengths to reconcile and intellectually bring other religions (including science) under the wings of the Bahá'í Faith. A case in point would be the use of the Buddha in the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the son of Bahá'u'lláh whose commentaries on his father's revelation are considered a revelation themselves) writes:

The founder of Buddhism was a wonderful soul. He established the Oneness of God, but later the original principles of his doctrines gradually disappeared, and ignorant customs and ceremonials arose and increased, until they finally ended in the worship of statues and images.<sup>16</sup>

This is a highly simplistic (and arguably false) view of the Buddha's teachings, especially the bit about God. Krishna is also listed as a Manifestation, but rarely talked about.

Finally, both Mani and Bahá'u'lláh share the following: a passion to create a universal religion that would unite all mankind; zealous but deliberative missionary teachings and tendencies; and generally pacifist lifestyles. Their doctrines are essentially ecumenical and anti-ritualistic.

## DIFFERENCES

Despite the similarities between Mani and Bahá'u'lláh, they diverge greatly in their core teachings and practices. The foremost difference is a fundamental disagreement about the nature of God.

---

<sup>14</sup> Denis MacEoin, "Baha'ism" in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells (England: Penguin Books, 1984), 486-487.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>16</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, trans. Laura Clifford Barney (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trüber & Co. Ltd., 1908), 189.

Mani, like Bahá'u'lláh, is a monotheist, but he is also a strict dualist. He taught that two antagonistic powers control the universe: light (goodness—identified with God) and darkness (chaos or evil).<sup>17</sup> For him,

The ultimate sin, for which there is no repentance is the refusal to accept the special knowledge imparted by the *Nous* about the primordial existence of the two principles [good/light and evil/matter].<sup>18</sup>

Good and evil are absolute, uncreate, and totally separate entities. This primary conviction shows that Mani had adopted, incorporated, and internalized the Gnosticism present at his day into his religion. (Gnosticism is:

a religion in its own right, whose myths state that the Unknown God is not the creator (demiurge, YHVH); the world is an error, the consequence of a fall and split within the deity; and that man, spiritual man, is alien to the natural world and related to the deity and becomes conscious of his deepest Self when he hears the word of revelation. Not sin or guilt, but unconsciousness, is the cause of evil.<sup>19</sup>)

Mani especially draws from Zoroastrian theology, which employs monotheisticdualism to simultaneously attack polytheism and explain the origin of evil.<sup>20</sup> Although Mani does teach the existence of many “gods,” and the Manichaeans had full pantheons, Mani also stresses that all good “gods” actually and ultimately equate with the highest divine principle, which he calls the Father of Light.

Mani’s doctrines naturally flow from his basic dualistic conception of God. For instance, dualism sets up an antipathy between spirit and flesh,

---

<sup>17</sup> Evans, 707.

<sup>18</sup> Lieu, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Quispel, 567.

<sup>20</sup> Gherardo Gnoli, “Zoroastrianism” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 15: 581.

and Mani's religion is consequently rather pessimistic and world-denying. Also, because dualism equates reason and logic with the good side, Mani's followers strongly emphasized the reasonableness of Mani's revelation, especially in the West. Augustine of Hippo had in earlier life been a Manichee, and it appears:

What fascinated Augustine was Manichaeism's apparent ability to suggest a complete cosmic interpretation, endeavouring at the very first examination to offer a rational explanation of all phenomena. This concurrence of religion and knowledge, this theosophy, this it was above all that impressed and absorbed the young African rhetorician. It was only, he said himself, their assertion of being able "to remove the dread authority and by excellent and plain reason to lead to God and to free of all error those who would harken to them" that led him to fall victim to such people.<sup>21</sup>

However, Mani was not a philosopher, despite his followers' proclamations to the contrary. Although his myths drew from generally accepted Greek philosophical themes and had biblical foundation, he and his followers could not withstand the intellectual and philosophical attacks of the well-trained Western Christians.<sup>22</sup> As one scholar maintains:

In fact the Manichees could call only upon Mani's word, and the Master himself does not seem to have adduced any external proof...To this could be added the circumstance mentioned by Mani himself that not one of the earlier religious founders had composed writings in the way he had. But this too is a reason that would go unchallenged only on the part of those who already believed his doctrine. A truly rational reason can be cited as little by Mani and his followers as can external proof. In the face of rationalistic argument the Manichees are at a loss...It is, however,

---

<sup>21</sup>Widengren, 122.

<sup>22</sup>Quispel, 569.

also quite natural, for a religion based simply on revelation is not a cogent doctrine whose truth can be established on logical grounds.<sup>23</sup>

Mani, who, because of dualism, asserted that the created universe is primarily evil, teaches in his soteriological and eschatological myths that the world's creation occurred after a cosmic battle between good and evil. Good "light particles" became entrapped in evil matter, and a person's salvation involved liberating them. Mani's myths explain how the "light particles" can be released, and Mani expected his myths to be taken absolutely literally, as any sensible practice of the Manichaean religion requires this.

Mani set up monasteries and appointed the elect. Their lifestyle, based on Mani's teachings, would free their souls and "light particles" from the constraints of evil matter. The elect, who lead an irreproachably ethical and ascetic life would eat plants (which have high concentrations of the light particles) and release the light particles during digestion. (The monastic lifestyle is a natural result of dualism and its antipathy toward the physical world.) Mani speaks negatively about women and even though the laity could marry, he highly discouraged the production of offspring because anything "fleshly" or corporeal is evil.

Manichaeans believed that if a person did not receive Mani's revelation and adopt his religion, his soul would remain entangled in the choking grip of matter. Finally, at the last judgment (presided over by Jesus), the infidel would be cast down into the world of darkness, that is, into hell.<sup>24</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh, on the other hand, is a strict monotheist and, true to his Islamic background, stresses the absolute Unity of God. In the Bahá'í Faith, God is transcendent and ultimately unknowable. As one Bahá'í writes:

God as Creator stands above His creation, and...man by virtue of having been created, can never ascend to such heights as to understand the essence of his own Creator. Any description, image or

---

<sup>23</sup> Widengren, 126.

<sup>24</sup> Lieu, 21.

likeness which may be attributed to the essence and nature of God can only be described as man's imagination.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, as a scholar observes:

The Bahá'í concept of the Deity envisions a Being Who is independent of His creation but is cognitive, caring, and concerned for His creation and its progress. For this reason He guides creation toward fulfillment. It is also clear that God wishes to express His love by creating beings capable of understanding His attributes and manifesting that understanding in action.<sup>26</sup>

Many things follow from this fundamental idea of the Unity of God. For example: creation is basically good; there is an essential unity of all mankind; and the sexes are equal. In fact, the concept of Unity is so strong that the Bahá'ís do not ascribe evil any real existence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

The intellectual realities, such as all the qualities and admirable perfection of man, are purely good, and exist. Evil is simply their non-existence. So ignorance is the want of knowledge, error is the want of guidance, forgetfulness is the want of memory, stupidity is the want of good sense. All these things have no real existence... one thing in relation to another may be evil, and at the same time within the limits of its proper being it may not be evil.<sup>27</sup>

The Bahá'í Faith is a primarily optimistic and world-affirming religion.

The Bahá'ís believe the Bab's and Bahá'u'lláh's revelations (and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's commentaries) are reasonable *and* good. Scriptural truth can, they claim, even be grasped by the simple and poorly educated (although education is strongly recommended). The Bahá'í revelation provides a vision of world order and peace while also enabling the Bahá'ís to unravel

---

<sup>25</sup> Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1974), 1.

<sup>26</sup> John S. Hatcher, *The Purpose of Physical Reality: The Kingdom of Names* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), 47.

<sup>27</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 301-302.

the mysteries of faith. If, for some reason, a person does not recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation, he or she will simply fail to develop spiritually in this world and be at a disadvantage in the next. Still, as one Bahá'í writes:

The highest station destined for man is to be illumined by the spirit of faith, which comes through recognition of the Manifestation of God for the age and through obedience to His commandments. To attain this station is the very purpose for which God created man.<sup>28</sup>

The Unity of God extends to God's creation—man. This principal is so strong that the Bahá'í religious community has no clergy and all members are on the same footing (unlike Manichaeism, which divided its followers into elect and laity). The Unity of mankind calls for racial harmony and extends to a tolerance towards other religious viewpoints.

There is only one vestige of duality remaining in the Bahá'í faith—the duality of soul and body. However, unlike the Manichaeans who, from their Gnostic dualism, saw a bellicose relationship between the two, the Bahá'í idea of Unity and consequent negation of evil in nature leads them to see the body as primarily a servant of the soul. One Bahá'í writes:

The individual comes into being when the soul, emanating from these spiritual worlds, becomes associated with the embryo before birth. But this association is far above material relationship such as egress or regress, entry or exit, since the soul does not belong to the world of matter. The relationship is like that of light to a mirror. The light which appears in the mirror is not *inside* it. Similarly, the soul is not *within* the body. It has a special relationship to the body and together they form the human being.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Taherzadeh, 73.

<sup>29</sup> Taherzadeh, 72.

## CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, the Manichaeans and the Bahá'ís share a similar doctrine of revelation and similar patterns of behavior, but their fundamental ideas about the nature of God are radically different. Now, if the character of a religion is founded on its notion of God, as Swedenborg suggests, it follows that if two religions have different ideas of God, they will also take different forms and reach different conclusions. This is apparent in the case of Manichaeism and the Bahá'ís; one maintains the concept of monotheistic-dualism, which acknowledges and highlights the presence of evil, and, from its Gnostic tendencies, develops a pessimistic and world-denying religion, while the other possesses a notion of strict monotheism and does not even concede the existence of true objective evil, and, from its doctrine of Unity, cultivates an optimistic and world-affirming religion. Consequently, though both share many features, the fundamental deviation in the doctrine of Divinity leads the Manichaeans and the Bahá'ís to very different ends.

In short, if the idea of God is fundamental in determining the form that a religion takes, then two religions having differing ideas of God would take different forms. Manichaeism and the Bahá'í Faith have differing ideas of God and take different forms. Therefore, the idea of God is fundamental in determining the form that a religion takes, just as the Writings affirm. □

## Bibliography

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*, trans. Laura Clifford Barney. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trüber & Co. Ltd., 1908.
- Bausani, Alessandro. "Babis" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.
- Bausani, Alessandro. "Baha'is" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.
- Cragg, Kenneth. "Christianity in the Middle East" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.
- Evans, Ivor H. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, revised centenary edition. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981.
- Frend, W. H. C. "Monophysitism" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.

## A COMPARISON OF MANICHAISM AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

- Gnoli, Gherardo. "Mani" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987. Vol. 9, pp. 158-161.
- Gnoli, Gherardo. "Manichaeism: An Overview" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.
- Gnoli, Gherardo. "Zoroastrianism" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.
- Hatcher, John S. *The Purpose of Physical Reality: The Kingdom of Names*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987.
- Keller, Helen. *My Religion*, 1956 edition. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc., 1956.
- Lieu, Samuel N. *Manichaeism: In the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China, A Historical Survey*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.
- MacEoin, Denis. "Baha'ism" in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells. England: Penguin Books, 1984.
- Madelung, Wilferd. "Shiism" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.
- Quispel, Gilles. "Gnosticism from Its Origins to the Middle Ages" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.
- Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Angelic Wisdom Concerning the Divine Love and the Divine Wisdom*, trans. John C. Ager, standard Edition. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc., 1988.
- Taherzadeh, Adib. *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1974.
- Waldman, Marilyn Robinson. "Nubuwah" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.
- Widengren, Geo. *Mani and Manichaeism*, trans. Charles Kessler. London: Weidengeld and Nicolson, 1965.
- Wilken, Robert L. "Nestorianism" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.



