THE KITÁB-I-AQDAS
ITS PLACE IN BAHÁ'Í LITERATURE

1992 marked the centenary of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh. In the past hundred years, the Faith He founded has grown from an obscure movement in the Middle East to the second most widespread of the world's independent religions.* The Bahá'í community, which embraces people from virtually every racial and tribal group, and has maintained its unity in doing so, very likely represents the most diverse organized body of people on the planet today.

The centenary coincides with the appearance of the first authorized English-language edition of the book that is central among Bahá'u'lláh's writings, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ("The Most Holy Book"). Nucleus of a body of writings supplementing and explaining it, the *Aqdas* was first published in its original Arabic, in Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime. As the Bahá'í community emerged throughout the world, the book's provisions determined its shape and development, through the insights provided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'u'lláh's son and great-grandson. Both were successively appointed under His authority as the interpreters of His message.

The newly published volume is extensively annotated on the basis of Bahá'u'lláh's own amplification of the text and the work of His two interpreters. Translations into other languages will quickly follow.

Humanity's Coming of Age

The expansion of the Bahá'í community has brought the teachings of its Founder to the attention of an ever-widening public. Frequently cited among these themes are the oneness of the human race, the equality of the sexes, and the essential harmony of faith and reason. Perhaps especially familiar are concepts of the underlying unity of all religions and the common purpose of the Prophets who have inspired them.

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the evolutionary process provide a helpful context for an understanding of the purpose of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. The human race as Bahá'u'lláh describes it has neither fallen from some primordial perfection nor is it the product of socio-economic forces. As the arrowhead of evolution, human consciousness has latent within it all of the attributes of a Divinity whose essence is forever unknowable.

What should be recognized, Bahá'u'lláh says, is that these capacities have owed their cultivation chiefly to the driving force provided throughout history by successive interventions of that same ultimate Reality. Associated with the missions of such transcendent figures as Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, and Muḥammad, the phenomenon of Divine Revelation is an ever-recurring one. Without either beginning or end, it is an integral feature of the evolutionary order and the ultimate cause of the civilizing of human nature.

Bahá'u'lláh's writings describe humanity as today entering on its collective coming-of-age, capable of seeing the entire panorama of its development as a continuum. The challenge of maturity is for the peoples of the world to accept that they are one race, and to build together the foundations of global civilization. The influence that is awakening this consciousness throughout the world is that universal Revelation of God which was promised in all the scriptures of humanity's past. Bahá'u'lláh writes as its Spokesman, in the line of Divine Messengers stretching back beyond the beginnings of recorded history.

In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* the Divine guidance for the age of humanity's collective maturity is endowed with a system of law, precept, and institutions capable of bringing into existence a global commonwealth ordered by principles of social justice.

"This is a Book", its concluding pages state, "which hath become the Lamp of the Eternal unto the world, and His straight, undeviating Path amidst the peoples of the earth. Say: This is the Dayspring of Divine knowledge, if ye be of them that understand, and the Dawning-place of God's commandments, if ye be of those who comprehend."

Foundations of a Global Ethos

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* makes its appearance in a world which, since the Enlightenment's rejection of religion as the ultimate moral authority, has engaged in an increasingly urgent search for an

alternative place to stand. Today, it is apparent that this effort has failed. Neither Marxist determinism nor popular faith in situational or consensus ethics offers a basis upon which the system of values required by an emerging global society can be erected.

Bahá'u'lláh reasserts the sovereignty of God as the sole authority governing moral life. God exists; He is the Source of all that is; He reveals through His Messengers those laws and principles that are primarily responsible for the civilizing of human nature. The autonomy of the individual is conditioned, therefore, not only by the limitations of the natural world he or she inhabits, but also by a spiritual universe that transcends and pervades it. "Hold ye fast unto His statutes and commandments", is the counsel of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, "and be not of those who, following their idle fancies and vain imaginings, have clung to the standards fixed by their own selves, and cast behind their backs the standards laid down by God."

Fundamental values around which all past societies have organized themselves are reformulated in the *Aqdas* to meet the needs of a planet contracted into a single homeland and a human race awakening to greatly enhanced powers of reason and perception. New laws and concepts are enunciated whose aim is to free human consciousness from culturally conditioned patterns of response and to nurture the emergence of global civilization.

The *Aqdas* is not a systematic code of law. Guidance that relates to details of individual life or social practice is set in passages which summon the reader to a challenging new conception of human nature and purpose. Evgenii Eduardovich Bertels, the Russian orientalist, compared Bahá'u'lláh's pen writing the *Aqdas* to a bird, now soaring on the summits of heaven, now descending to touch the homeliest questions of everyday need.

The book's prescriptions range across subjects as varied as aesthetics, weapons control, sanitation, penal law, and the need for an auxiliary, international language. The inextinguishable human proclivity toward ritual is directed into a few areas of personal life. Various prohibitions inherited from earlier religious traditions are annulled and the door is firmly shut on the emergence of a professional clergy. The principal themes addressed in the *Aqdas*, however, are those great issues that are the dominant concerns of all Bahá'u'lláh's writings and of contemporary society: justice, government, law, liberty, belief, education, family, and the promotion of civilization.

On Justice

Throughout the ages of its long journey from barbarism, the human race has been sustained by the promise—enshrined in the scriptures of all the great religions—that an age of justice would one day come. The central thrust of Bahá'u'lláh's writings is that we are witnessing its dawn. Through travail and suffering the peoples of the world are being purged of anachronistic habits and attitudes and awakened to the possibilities that their common humanity confers. They are being prepared to accept both their own oneness and their ultimate dependence on the justice of a loving and unfailing Creator.

Justice is conceived by Bahá'u'lláh as the foundation-stone of the coming global civilization. It is the essential means for the integration of the diverse peoples and communities of the planet. "The purpose of justice", Bahá'u'lláh's writings state, "is the appearance of unity among men."

Love, mercy, and forgiveness are among the qualities that must distinguish human beings in their personal relationships one with another; the gradual cultivation of such responses in human nature has been one of the primary objects of the successive revelations of the Divine will. For these qualities to flourish as the distinguishing features of human life, however, each member of society and each component group must be able to trust that he or she is protected by standards that apply equally to all.

"This is the infallible Balance which the Hand of God is holding, in which all who are in the heavens and all who are on earth are weighed ..."

The concepts, laws, and principles enunciated in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* are intended to provide the spiritual bedrock of this assurance. The book represents, in its own words, "the infallible Balance

which the Hand of God is holding, in which all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth are weighed.... Through it the poor have been enriched, the learned enlightened, and the seekers enabled to ascend unto the presence of God."

On Government

The *Aqdas* reiterates Bahá'u'lláh's endorsement, expressed in a number of places in His writings, of the principle of democratic and constitutional government. Its prescriptions envision the State as the servant of God and an instrument ensuring the rights of all of society's members.

Several passages of the book make reference to monarchs of the nineteenth century. They are warned that through historical processes over which they will have no control, the governors of human society will be compelled to recognize that they are essentially "vassals" of God answerable for the powers they exercise.

"The precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its people."

These passages are best appreciated in the context of a larger body of major writings addressed to these same rulers. In them, Bahá'u'lláh insists that the real "treasures" of any land are its people. Governments are warned "not to deal unjustly with any one that appealeth to you"; they are called on to recognize that "the poor are the trust of God in your midst"; the growing burden of public taxation is declared to be "wholly and grossly unjust"; should any government commit aggression, the rest are called on to "rise ye all against him, for this is naught but manifest justice."

Against this background the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* admonishes the arbiters of human affairs to defend the rights of the helpless and disadvantaged. Governments are not only summoned to "bind ... the broken with the hands of justice," but also have the moral right and obligation to "crush the oppressor" who is responsible for such abuses, "with the rod of the commandments of your Lord".

On Law

As western civilization has spread, legal codes everywhere have parted company with the metaphysical moorings that originally anchored them. A consequence has been that the concerns of law have come to focus chiefly on the tasks of deterring crime and settling disputes. In practice, even this relatively limited resolve has steadily weakened in the face of accelerating social breakdown. The behavioural sciences, however valuable, have not fulfilled their early promise as a sufficient source of relief.

Elaboration and full codification of the Divine Law revealed by Bahá'u'lláh is a task for posterity, and much of its application envisions a condition of society that will emerge only in the distant future. Its essential nature, however, is already apparent. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* reasserts both man's moral responsibility for his actions and the right of society to enforce those laws established for the maintenance of the general well-being: "Beware lest, through compassion, ye neglect to carry out the statutes of the religion of God; do that which hath been bidden you by Him Who is compassionate and merciful."

"Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power."

The fundamental purpose of the Divine commandments, whether or not they carry legal sanctions, is to awaken the rational soul to its own real nature and to the powers latent within it. The Book of God is thus the "quickener of mankind", the "source of true felicity". When seen with the eyes of the spirit, it is "the Bounty of God". "Consider the mercy of God and His gifts," the *Aqdas* counsels: "He enjoineth upon you that which shall profit you, though He Himself can well dispense with all creatures."

On Liberty

One of the central dilemmas of Western civilization is society's need to draw a clear line between freedom and licence. Civil and other legitimate human rights have come to be used as justification for the expression of almost any human impulse. At best, the accepted limit on the individual's rights is the point at which these claims infringe on the rights of others.

Such a standard, even if it could be achieved, assumes a human race that is capable of determining, in most areas of moral decision, behaviour that will serve its real needs. Thus, analogies are frequently drawn to various fields of scientific activity, the implication being that objective standards exist for attaining a reasonable measure of consensus on the promotion of human well-being.

"Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty."

But science is admittedly amoral and the cultural perceptions of humanity widely divergent. We confront again in Bahá'u'lláh's writings His fundamental assertion that moral insight and coherence come only as the gift of that Divinity which "chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse ... underlying the whole of creation."

It is in this perspective that the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* condemns strongly attempts to invoke "liberty" as justification for conduct that "causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety", conduct that "debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity".

On Belief

The revelation of God for the age of humanity's collective maturity, Bahá'u'lláh says, transcends the diverse sectarian systems inherited from past ages. As there is but one ultimate Reality, and one human race inhabiting our planet, so the relationship between them has always been one and unbroken. The primary purpose of the Messengers of God has not been to teach different religions but progressively to unlock a wider range of capacities within human consciousness and human society.

In a commentary related to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh states: "The Prophets and Chosen Ones have all been commissioned by the One True God ... to nurture the trees of human existence with the living waters of uprightness and understanding, that there may appear from them that which God hath deposited within their inmost selves." The investigation of truth is, therefore, a right and responsibility of the individual conscience. No person or agency can claim the authority to coerce belief or compel uniformity of opinion.

"This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future."

It is in this spirit that the *Aqdas* urges: "Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God," and that it counsels: "Beware lest any name debar you from Him Who is the Possessor of all names." Its sharp warning to clergy and theologians of the world's diverse religious traditions must be read in this same perspective: "Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men."

On Learning

Bahá'u'lláh's Writings declare education to be the right and obligation of every person, woman and man alike. "Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone." An age has dawned, He says, in which "the secrets of the earth are laid bare", and their exploration in a spirit of service to humanity is an act of worship.

The most important goal of education is the discovery and cultivation of the moral capacities latent in human nature itself. In consequence of the universal Revelation of God, "a new life is, in this age, stirring within all the peoples of the earth". A revolution in information, arts, and technologies has been set in motion that will most greatly advantage those who learn to function as moral beings, committed to the ideal of global unity. It will be through the acquisition of knowledge, not through privileges of sex, race, or wealth, that the true empowerment of the world's peoples will increasingly come.

"This is the Dayspring of Divine knowledge, if ye be of them that understand ..."

Such education calls for the exercise of self-discipline. The motivation that will make the effort possible is love for God. The Divine commandments, the *Aqdas* says, are no "mere code of laws", but the "lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures."

On Family

God hath prescribed matrimony unto you", the *Aqdas* says, "... that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants." Bahá'u'lláh envisions the re-emergence of the extended family as the norm throughout the world, and various ordinances of the *Aqdas* reinforce this ideal. While the selection of a marital partner rests with the son or daughter concerned, for example, the requirement to seek parental consent aims at creating a family investment in the success of the marriage.

The provisions of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* relating to family must be read in the context of Bahá'u'lláh's general teachings. "Women and men", He writes, "have been and will always be equal in the sight of God." Justice today demands that society so reorganize its affairs as to provide equality of opportunity to all persons, without regard to differences of sex. Should financial resources be so limited that choices must be made, educational priority should be given to girls over boys.

"Enter into wedlock, O people, that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants."

The latter injunction relates to certain responsibilities and claims that attach to sexual identity. The education of girls is particularly important because, although both parents participate in the education of children, mothers have the predominant influence during the earliest years. They are the primary agents of the civilizing process.

Similarly, men are called on to assume the chief responsibilities for the maintenance of families' financial well-being, and a number of provisions in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* take this particularly into account.

On the Advancement of Civilization

A common feature of all of the great religions of the past has been the teaching that the purpose of human life is for the soul to know, to love, and to worship its Creator. Bahá'u'lláh's writings on this theme are particularly rich and evocative. They emphasize, however, that this inner spiritual quickening must motivate each human being to respond in his or her own way to the truth that: "All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."

Capacities as yet undreamed of are awakening in the peoples of all races and cultures; their blending will transform the very nature of cultural experience: "This is the Day in which God's most excellent favours have been poured out upon men.... Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead."

"The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order."

As the peoples of the world are drawn inescapably into a single planetary society, they are being challenged to free themselves from cultural limitations and prejudices, and to embrace the message of God that alone can unite their hearts and minds. In the words of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: "O peoples of the earth! ... Cast away that which ye possess, and, on the wings of detachment, soar beyond all created things. Thus biddeth you the Lord of creation, the movement of Whose Pen hath revolutionized the soul of mankind."

THE KITÁB-I-AQDAS AND
THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

"The earth", Bahá'u'lláh says, "is but one country, and mankind its citizens." Today, His teachings find expression in the life of a united worldwide community representing the entire diversity of humankind and established in every part of the globe. Its achievements in such matters as racial integration, the equality of the sexes, and the promotion of education are particularly noteworthy.

The distinguishing feature of the Bahá'í community, however, is the administrative system with which its Founder endowed it. Operating on consultative principles taught by Bahá'u'lláh, the community is administered by democratically elected councils at the local, national, and international levels. It has no clergy. Its activities are supported solely by the financial contributions of its own registered membership.

The system is based on explicit provisions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: "The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established.... It behoveth them [its members] to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth."

To the Faith's international governing body, the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'u'lláh entrusted the function of deciding on all matters not explicitly revealed in the Text itself. Thus He ensured that, until the advent of the next Manifestation of God a thousand or more years hence, the World Order He founded will be equipped with a legislative authority able to keep it abreast of the needs of a rapidly changing world.

The new pattern of society which He inaugurated, Bahá'u'lláh says, will unfold in the same gradual and inexorable fashion that characterizes all the phenomena of the evolutionary process: "Consider the sun. How feeble its rays the moment it appeareth above the horizon. How gradually its warmth and potency increase as it approacheth its zenith, enabling meanwhile all created things to adapt themselves to the growing intensity of its light."

* *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 1982; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1992 ↩

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