

LIGHTS OF 'IRFÁN

Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs



Papers Presented at the 'Irfán
Colloquia and Seminars

Book Thirteen



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Lights of 'Irfán: Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs
Papers Presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars
Book Thirteen

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O My servants! Through the' might of God and His power, and out of the' treasury of His knowledge' and wisdom, I have' brought forth and revealed unto you the' pearls that lay concealed in the' depths of His everlasting ocean. I have' summoned the' Maids of Heaven to emerge from behind the' veil of concealment, and have' clothed them with these' words of Mine'—words of consummate' power and wisdom. I have', moreover, with the' hand of divine' power, unsealed the' choice' wine' of My Revelation, and have' wafted its holy, its hidden, and musk-laden fragrance' upon all created things. Who else' but yourselves is to be blamed if ye' choose' to remain unendowed with so great an outpouring of God's transcendent and all-encompassing grace; with so bright a revelation of His resplendent mercy?...

— Baha'u'llah

Gleanings from the Writings of
Bahá'u'lláh, p.327–8

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Preface

The main purpose of the annual sessions of the 'Irfán Colloquium and the publication of its proceedings in the Lights of 'Irfán series is the promotion of deep and systematic studies in the Writings of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith and the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í belief system embodied in those Writings. Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, referring to such scholarly undertaking, has proclaimed, "*Whoso hath searched the depths of the oceans that lie hid within these exalted words, and fathomed their import, can be said to have discovered a glimmer of the unspeakable glory with which this mighty, this sublime, and most holy Revelation hath been endowed.*"(GWB 9)

Publication of the present volume of *Lights of 'Irfán* coincides with the centenary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's extensive, history-making visit to North America. Four of the articles in this volume are devoted to that visit and the discussion of the teachings promoted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during that sojourn. *'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America* is a preliminary analysis of the recorded accounts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the United States and Canada. *The Choice of the West for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Epoch-making Trip* explores the reasons for choosing Western Europe and North America, particularly the United States, and discusses the tremendous results achieved by this visit. *'Abdu'l-Bahá's Encounter with Modernity During His Western Travels* presents a picture of the developments in material civilization in Europe and America in the early days of the 20th century, and how many people were living in relative prosperity and comfort in those democracies but still had not cast off their racist and sexist beliefs and philosophies. The article chronicles many situations encountered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His travels that would have been entirely new to His experience and how He responded to them.. *The Fragility of Goodness: Hexis and Práxis in the Historical Figure of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* seeks to examine, through

the lessons presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá' in His travels to the West, how the internal goodness of character or the soul may be preserved despite interference from the material world and how that character may survive the sobering perspective of moral failure.

Interpretation and Elucidation provides clear and succinct explanations for these two important concepts as they are used in the Bahá'í Teachings and explores their significance for the unity of the Faith. While individual Bahá'ís are free to have their own personal understandings and 'interpretation' of the scripture, their personal views are considered informal and not binding for other individuals. This is an essential and protective feature of the Covenant to preserve unity in the Bahá'í community and protect it from schism. Without this Covenant, it would be impossible to realize the pivotal principle of the Bahá'í teachings that calls for unity and fellowship amongst all the peoples of the world.

Several articles in this volume are related to the interface of the Bahá'í paradigm with global challenges and philosophical issues. *Kant's "Perpetual Peace" and the Bahá'í Writings* is a comparative study of Immanuel Kant's philosophical essay entitled *Perpetual Peace* and Bahá'u'lláh's proposal for the establishment of world unity and peace.

Apocalyptic Thinking and Process Thinking: Bahá'u'lláh's Contribution to Religious Thought invites new ways of thinking. The author aims at contrasting the views of classical religious apocalyptic thinking, in which the affairs of the world are viewed as static until they are suddenly moved from one state to another by supernatural intervention, with a new conceptualization of change initiated by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Under this new paradigm, religious change is understood as a continuous process, not a sudden jump from one state to another. Furthermore, changes in the world are to be brought about through human effort and not by sudden acts of external divine intervention. This concept of change is examined in

relation to 20th century expectations of many Bahá'ís concerning the establishment of the Lesser Peace, about which there was a great deal of apocalyptic thinking in the years prior to 2000.

The accelerating effects of secularism and atheism are examined in two articles: *I Know Not How to Sing Thy Praise* is a commentary on a prayer of Bahá'u'lláh that explores a basic question of theology regarding “God” in this day and age, when practical and theoretical atheism and irreligion has captured the minds and shaped the belief systems of a large and ever-increasing number of people. The article seeks to present an answer to the question of “how to believe in God today,” through a commentary on the four modes of Revelation described by the Báb, which are used to understand the theological locus of the many prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh.

The New Atheism—A Bahá'í Perspective examines the writings of four writers (Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris and Dennett) at the forefront of a movement to advance an aggressively anti-religious position that has gathered much popular attention in recent years. The article carefully analyzes the foundational principles of the “new atheism” both in light of the Bahá'í Writings and on grounds of philosophical and scientific rationality, exploring a number of areas in which the Bahá'í teachings and the new atheists agree, as well as those areas where they dramatically diverge.

Two thoughtful and scholarly studies in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, are presented in this volume, both of which concentrate on poems revealed by Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh's Persian poems written before 1863 provides a provisional list of Bahá'u'lláh's Persian poems written before the public declaration of His mission. These poems can be seen as the early fruit of the mystical experiences Bahá'u'lláh had when He was jailed in the *Siyáh-Chál* (Black Pit) in Tehran in October 1852. This meticulously

annotated article contains brief descriptions of 16 poems written in Persian by Bahá'u'lláh together with one additional poem, *Qaṣídiy-i-Varqá'íyyih*, which is in Arabic. Please note that translations of Bahá'u'lláh's poetry used in this article are temporary and informal. They are not authorized translations. They are made only for presentation at the 'Irfán Colloquium. These translations should not be quoted, published or distributed in any form or through any media.

From time to time, *Lights of 'Irfán* contains articles related to studies in the Bahá'í Writings written by non-Bahá'í scholars. In this volume, we are pleased to welcome another such contribution. ***Clouds and the Hiding God: Observations on the Origins of Some Terms in the Early Writings of Bahá'u'lláh***, explores the imagery of clouds, starting with three early mystical Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, the Persian poem *Rashḥ-i-'Amá*, together with *Lawḥ-i-Kull aṭ-Ṭá'ám*, and *Qaṣídiy-i-Varqá'íyyih*, in Arabic. The article explores different ways in which the imagery of the cloud is used in these and other writings of Bahá'u'lláh. The most common is the cloud as “the hiding place of the Divine Being”, with related references to clouds as veils. Other instances include the use of clouds as a vehicle of conveyance such as a chariot and the imagery of rain clouds which water the earth and convey God's bounties and blessings. The article also illustrates the continuity of this imagery throughout the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions and suggests there is evidence for a broader, more universal character to this symbolism in the religious lexicon of humanity.

The section entitled “**Elucidations**” is aimed at clarifying particular issues and topics of interest in Bahá'í studies and includes four items:

The first is the letter of 7 April 2008 from the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice on the clarification of the ***Authority and Centrality of the Universal House of Justice***. This letter deals with specific questions that had arisen regarding the infallibility of the House

of Justice, following publication of the book, “*Making the Crooked Straight*” as well as other publications by the same author. This is the English version of a letter that was written in Persian on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Friends in Iran. It replaces the courtesy translation that was published in the Elucidations section of the *Lights of ‘Irfán*, Book Eleven.

The second item, *Whether the Apostle Paul was a “False Teacher,”* is a memorandum of the Research Department of the Bahá’í World Centre written in response to a question asked by an individual Bahá’í. It contains references in the Bahá’í Writings to two prominent figures in early Christianity, St. Peter and St. Paul.

Third, is a memorandum dated 2 April 2012 from the Research Department at the Bahá’í World Centre containing information gleaned from its study of questions regarding two subjects. The first concerns the ancient religion of the **Sabaeans**, considered to be the ancestral religion of Abraham. The memorandum also addresses questions about **African-based religions** that have taken root in the Americas including Yoruba, Santeria and Brazilian Candomblé.

The final item in this section, **Supreme Tribunal** (*Mahkamiy-i-Kubra*), is the response to a question asking for clarification of the nature and purpose of the institutions of the Bahá’í Courts and the Supreme Tribunal mentioned in the writings of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith.

Appendix I in this volume is a tribute to the memory of Mr. Ian Semple (1928 –2011), who for five decades served as an elected member, first of the International Bahá’í Council and subsequently of the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the Bahá’í community. He was a sincere supporter of the ‘Irfán Colloquium and a valuable contributor to the *Lights of ‘Irfán*.

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Appendix II contains the bibliography of Bahá'í Writings and their abbreviations that are used in the text of the papers for referencing the sources of the quoted passages.

Appendix III provides a complete list of the contents of previous volumes of the *Lights of 'Irfán*. It also shows the range, types, scope and methodological approaches of the papers that have been presented and are welcome to be presented at future 'Irfán Colloquia. In addition to the papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia, authors of research papers related to the main goals of the 'Irfán Colloquium are welcome to directly submit their work for publication in the *Lights of 'Irfán*.

Starting with Book Six we made two changes to the style guide for *Lights of 'Irfán*. All “authoritative” publications are cited by an abbreviation (see Appendix II for the current list of these works with their standard abbreviations). Words of Prophets/Manifestations, i.e. quotations from Sacred Writings, (not including statements by Shoghi Effendi or the Universal House of Justice), are italicized.

All papers in this volume present the views and understanding of their authors. The texts of the papers are published as provided by the authors. Their writing styles and scholarly approaches are therefore different. Articles are published in this volume according to the alphabetical order of the author's surnames.

Iraj Ayman
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