

## The New Age Phenomenon and the Bahá’í Faith

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The New Age phenomenon has received very little attention in the Bahá’í Faith and Bahá’í scholarship. Udo Schaefer, the great pioneer of Bahá’í scholarship, was probably the first to address this issue in 1992.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, in a special volume of *The Bahá’í Studies Review* devoted to the theme of Bahá’í scholarship, Stephen Lambden pointed out the need for Bahá’í scholars to study “The Age of Aquarius,” and further said that “Such Bahá’ís as are interested in this area should become acquainted with aspects of ‘new age’ philosophy and Bahá’í reactions to it through the study of sensible sources.”<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, and equally importantly, he suggested that:

Bahá’ís need to spell out, in light of Shoghi Effendi’s writings and other scriptural texts, our concept of the new age and its full realisation of the future....<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, in order to spell out “our concept of *the new age*” it is, on the one hand, necessary to examine the very idea of a “new age” by studying “sensible sources” i.e., to draw upon the sources of academic scholarship. On the other hand, in order to obtain “our concept of the new age” it is crucial to study the “new age” in the light of the Bahá’í scriptures.

Since the pioneering work of Schaefer and the scholarly advice of Lambden, the author of this paper and Paul Dodenhoff have, independently of each other,<sup>4</sup> recognized the importance of examining the relationship between the Bahá’í Faith and the New Age phenomenon (NAP).<sup>5</sup> Yet, the study of the relationship between the Bahá’í Faith and the NAP has barely begun, but in order to satisfy Lambden’s two perspectives, the purpose of this paper, is to briefly introduce the NAP and the Bahá’í Faith by answering the following set of questions:

- 1) Why should the relationship between the NAP and the Bahá’í Faith be examined?
- 2) What is “New Age” and how is it defined?
- 3) What are some of the similarities and differences between the NAP and the Bahá’í Faith?
- 4) How may the NAP be evaluated from a Bahá’í perspective?

### The Relationship Between the New Age Phenomenon and the Bahá’í Faith

First of all, some authors have associated the Bahá’í Faith with the NAP and have grouped it together with Theosophy, neo-Hindu reform movements, and neo-Sufism.<sup>6</sup>

Although, Kyle writes that “The Bahá’í faith has more tenuous connections with the New Age” he continues to state that:

While it [Bahá’í Faith] came out of Sufism [sic!] it has lost much of its mystical qualities. Yet *it does teach some ideas prevalent in the New Age*—oneness in world religions and the political order, and a coming new age.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, it ought to be studied since some scholars of religion claim that the NAP has surpassed and outdated Christianity as a belief-system/world-view in the West.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, if the above statements are true, and if we as Bahá’ís, are to be successful in our proclamations and teachings, especially with “Entry by troops,” it is vital to understand this “new” belief-system or world-view. These three reasons, taken together, may suffice to persuade Bahá’í scholars to further examine the relationship between the NAP and the Bahá’í Faith more thoroughly.<sup>9</sup>

### What is “New Age” and How is it Defined?

In a very real sense, humanity is approaching not only a new century but a new *millennium*. Hence, even from a secular and temporal perspective (which, in the West, is based on the birth of Christ) humanity is living at the threshold of a “new age.” It is also well known that millenarian and apocalyptic movements flourish at such critical turning points in history.<sup>10</sup>

Although the exact dating of the origin of the NAP is highly debated (as will be seen below), it has only recently caught the attention of scholars of religion. It has largely been ignored for two reasons: 1) it was seen as a “faddish” or appeared to be “shallow,” and 2) it has no clear boundaries (which will be discussed below),<sup>11</sup> and therefore, historically and methodologically, it has been much easier to study what has been labeled “New Religious Movements” (NRMs) since they are rather well defined and therefore more accessible for social and religious research. Furthermore, some scholars maintain that the NAP is a large “sub-culture” and that it is part of a much greater “paradigm shift” or “cultural shift” in the West, or that it is basically a “post-modern” phenomenon, while others state that it has by far surpassed and out-dated Christianity as a belief-system in the West and therefore should be evaluated as a “post-Christian” phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Others still, predict that the NAP as a movement is a transient fad, that it is doomed, but that its ideas may continue to influence and transform the present society.<sup>13</sup>

The NAP has, by a number of scholars, admittedly been problematic to define and study. For example, it is on the one hand seen to have ancient historical roots<sup>14</sup> (Hellenism 300 BCE, Gnosticism 100–300 CE, Hermetism 1500 CE), and, on the other hand, it is described as a phenomenon that began in the counterculture of the [19]60s–70s. These extreme perspectives can be seen by the descriptions by two leading scholars in this field. For example, Robert Ellwood sees the New Age as “a modern revival...of a long-standing tradition of what may be called the alternative spirituality of the west,” and that it can be traced to “the Greco-Roman world” via “Renaissance occultism...eighteenth century Freemasonry, and nineteenth-century Spiritualism and Theosophy,”<sup>15</sup> while Gordon Melton writes that “the New Age movement is a relatively new phenomenon. It developed in the late 1960s and emerged as a self-conscious movement in the early 1970s.”<sup>16</sup>

The NAP has further been defined and/or described as:

- a movement,<sup>17</sup> religion,<sup>18</sup> and quasi-religion<sup>19</sup>
- non-occult/non-esoteric,<sup>20</sup> while others say that it is occult/esoteric<sup>21</sup>
- centering on the Self/narcissism,<sup>22</sup> while others state that it is basically involved with social/global transformation<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the NAP has also been defined by its own adherents. For example, a leading New Age author, David Spangler,<sup>24</sup> discerns four levels of the NAP characterized as:

- 1) commercial (superficial)
- 2) glamour and popular culture (media attention)
- 3) “an image of change” (transformation/paradigm shift)
- 4) the birth of the sacred and a resacralizing of life on earth, the “new age is fundamentally a spiritual event”

From this brief overview it is possible to conclude and stress that the term “New Age” (like most religious terms and concepts) is multifaceted, highly ambiguous, and has many dimensions and levels, and therefore is rather difficult to describe and define.<sup>25</sup>

### Similarities and Differences Between New Age Phenomenon and the Bahá’í Faith

Despite the difficulties of defining the NAP, Lewis has enumerated some general characteristics of NRMs (as defined by Ellwood) which he also think are applicable to the New Age movement.<sup>26</sup> It is possible to compare these general characteristics of the NAP (in **bold**) to the Bahá’í Faith as follows:

- **Emphasis on Healing**

Healing is not emphasized in the Bahá’í Faith although the concept of healing does occur in the Bahá’í writings. e.g., the Manifestations of God are sometimes referred to as “Divine physicians” and the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is symbolically compared to an “Elixir.”<sup>27</sup> It is also recognized that humans can heal through spiritual means, especially through prayer.<sup>28</sup>

- **A Desire To Be “Modern” and Use Scientific Language**

The Bahá’í Faith is sometimes described as a “modern” religion,<sup>29</sup> especially suitable for this modern age, and that religion and science are seen as complementary is one of its fundamental principles.<sup>30</sup> It is the religious language, however, and not the scientific language, that dominates the Bahá’í writings.<sup>31</sup>

- **Eclecticism and Syncretism**

The Bahá’í Faith emerged historically in the Near- and Middle East, i.e., mainly within an Islamic religious context (both Shi’i and Sunni), although a variety of religions also coexisted (and still do) within this large area: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and a variety of Sufi orders. It is quite clear, judging from the Bahá’í writings, that Bahá’u’lláh was familiar with especially Islam and Christianity, but also with Zoroastrianism and, to some extent, even Hinduism.<sup>32</sup> It is possible to point out both eclecticism and syncretism within Bahá’í, but this is also the case for other religions.<sup>33</sup>

- **A Monistic and Impersonal Ontology**

It is here where the Bahá’í Faith clearly differs from the NAP, since the Bahá’í Faith ontology basically is panentheistic, i.e., God permeates the cosmos, and His attributes are reflected in creation. Bahá’u’lláh, for example, states that:

The whole universe reflecteth His glory, while He is independent of, and transcendeth His creatures. This is the true meaning of Divine unity. He Who is the Eternal Truth is the one Power Who exerciseth undisputed sovereignty over the world of being, Whose image is reflected in the mirror of the entire creation.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, God cannot be identified *with*, or reduced *to*, His creation since God is simultaneously seen as “independent of, and *transcendeth* His creatures.” Thus, God is ultimately transcendental which is clearly portrayed in another passage by Bahá’u’lláh:

Immeasurably exalted is He [God] above the strivings of the human mind to grasp His Essence, or of human tongue to describe His mystery. *No tie of direct intercourse can ever bind Him to the things He hath created*, nor can the most abstruse and most remote allusions of His creatures do justice to His being. . . He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His own exalted and indivisible Essence, and will everlastingly continue to remain concealed in His inaccessible majesty and glory.<sup>35</sup> [Emphasis mine]

Although God sometimes is described in agnostic or negative terms,<sup>36</sup> God is also described in personal and positive terms.<sup>37</sup> In other words, God is seen both as a *deus absconditus* (a hidden God) and a *deus revelatus* (a revealed God) described by Bahá’u’lláh as “the Visible and the Invisible” or even “the most manifest of the manifest and the most hidden of the hidden!”<sup>38</sup>

- **Optimism, Success Orientation, and a Tendency to Evolutionary Views**

The Bahá’í Faith may in general be described in optimistic and progressive terms but yet, there are also notions of decline, crises and even “apocalyptic” scenarios.<sup>39</sup> The evolutionary views are particularly strong and Darwin’s theory of evolution is not denied, but rather reinterpreted in, what could be called, a “spiritual theory of evolution.”<sup>40</sup>

- **Emphasis on Psychic Powers**

To develop psychic powers is not only de-emphasized in Bahá’í but even strongly discouraged.<sup>41</sup> Rather, it is the spiritual attributes and powers that should be developed, and which, ultimately, are seen as a reflection of the attributes and powers of God. For example, Bahá’u’lláh writes that:

Upon the reality of man . . . He [God] hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self<sup>42</sup>

Already here in this very brief overview and somewhat superficial comparison, it is possible to discern that it is very difficult to ascertain whether Bahá'í matches the NAP or not. On some points it certainly does, but on others it clearly does not.<sup>43</sup>

It is also possible to compare the Bahá'í Faith to another scheme, developed by Hammer, and which he refers to as "An aerial view of the New Age movement."<sup>44</sup>

- **Cosmos is an Unbroken Whole**

There are a few passages in the Bahá'í writings that could support such a view. For example 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that:

all parts of the creational world are of one whole...All the parts are subordinate to the whole. The contingent beings are the branches of the tree of life while the Messenger of God is the root of that tree.<sup>45</sup>

- **There is a directionality in this wholeness**

This statement could be equated with a "Bahá'í teleology," and teleological statements are readily found in the Bahá'í writings:

Thou didst wish to make Thyself known unto men; therefore, Thou didst, through a word of Thy mouth, bring creation into being and fashion the universe<sup>46</sup>

According to these passages, God expresses a wish, or desire, from his side, to be known, and this is ultimately upheld as the generating impulse of creation.<sup>47</sup> Thus, God's desire to be known, and God's creation of human beings in order to be known, appear to be intimately complementary. From another perspective, Bahá'u'lláh states that "The purpose all creation is the revelation of this most sublime, this most holy Day, the Day known as the Day of God."<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh states that the existence and life of "the destiny of the true believer" is "to be regarded as the originating purpose of all creation."<sup>49</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of man as "part of the universal plan"<sup>50</sup> and that "The purpose the creation of man is the attainment of the supreme virtues of humanity through descent of the heavenly bestowals."<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Shoghi Effendi refers to:

a greater Plan, one and indivisible, whose Source is God, whose author is Bahá'u'lláh, the theater of whose operations is the entire planet, and whose ultimate objectives are the unity of the human race and the peace of all mankind.<sup>52</sup>

- **This Wholeness is Permeated by a Power or Energy Which Connects Us with the Cosmos**

According to the Bahá'í view, the power or energy which permeates the cosmos is often referred to as the Holy Spirit. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that:

that both interaction and cooperation are evident and proven amongst all beings, whether large or small. In the case of large bodies interaction is as manifest as the sun, whilst in the case of small bodies, though interaction be unknown, yet the part is an indication of the whole. All these interactions therefore are connected with that all-embracing power which is their pivot, their center, their source and their motive power.<sup>53</sup>

Elsewhere he also says that:

All created forms are progressive in their planes, or kingdoms of existence, under the stimulus of the power or spirit of life. This universal energy is dynamic. Nothing is stationary in the material worlds of outer phenomena or in the inner world of intellect and consciousness.<sup>54</sup>

Although it was seen above that the universe is seen as an unbroken whole, there are numerous passages in the Bahá'í writings which makes it clear that the cosmos also is divided in "planes" or "kingdoms," and consequently, that there exists a certain "spiritual hierarchy."<sup>55</sup> The most crucial difference, however, is that the cosmos is viewed in neither monistic nor pantheistic terms, but that it is panentheistic.

- **Humanity has Mismanaged Its Own Wholeness (The Relationship Between Body–Soul)**

This is not emphasized in the Bahá’í Faith. It is rather humanity’s relationship with God, the Manifestations of God, and with the true nature of religion, that have been mismanaged.<sup>56</sup> For example, Bahá’u’lláh states that:

The vitality of men’s belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it. The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it?<sup>57</sup>

Here one may recognize the metaphor of the Manifestation of God as the “Divine Physician” who, through his “wholesome medicine” is able to restore and revive human society from a disease, described as the “corrosion of ungodliness.” This may be interpreted as either “atheism,” or the lack of vitality in one’s belief, or spirituality. It is especially noteworthy that the terms “potent Revelation” is equated with the “Elixir.” Notice also that Bahá’u’lláh is referring to the downfall of religiosity “in every land,” which is suggestive of a global process of secularization. It is hence possible to equate the malaise of humanity with the decline of religion. This would accentuate the intimate and mutual relationship between religion and humanity.<sup>58</sup>

- **The Planet Earth is a Wholeness**

This is clearly stated in the Bahá’í writings. The following passages by Bahá’u’lláh may exemplify such a view:

Regard ye the world as a man’s body, which is affected with diverse ailments, and the recovery of which dependeth upon the harmonizing of all of its component elements.<sup>59</sup>

Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies.<sup>60</sup>

With regard to the former point, it is evident from these passages that humanity has mismanaged its relationship with the planet earth as well.

- **Every Human Being has a Unique Place in This Wholeness**

This can also be confirmed in the Bahá’í-writings. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that:

man is but a part or member of that whereof nature is the whole.<sup>61</sup>

Continuing, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further likens man with a drop and the universe with the ocean, and asks:

Is it conceivable that a drop should be imbued with qualities of which the ocean is completely deprived? The drop is a part; the ocean is the whole.<sup>62</sup>

- **Human Beings Do Not Only Live This Life, But Have Transmigrated Through a Chain of Existences and Will Reincarnate Many More Times**

Here is another crucial difference between the NAP and the Bahá’í Faith, although the latter would be in agreement with the first two sentences in that: 1) there is life after death,<sup>63</sup> and 2) humanity, as a species, has transmigrated through a series of prior existences (the mineral, vegetable, and animal-kingdoms), but the Bahá’í writings do not harmonize with the concept of reincarnation,<sup>64</sup> since it is believed that the human soul is created at the moment of conception,<sup>65</sup> and that after this earthly existence, it evolves into a new dimension—the spiritual kingdom.<sup>66</sup>

- **There Are Other, Perhaps Better Paths to Knowledge Than the Senses and The Rational Mind**

This is clearly confirmed in the Bahá’í writings. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of “four methods of acquiring knowledge”: 1) the senses, 2) reason, 3) tradition, and 4) the bounty of the Holy Spirit. If the first is considered “imperfect” the last is described as “infallible and indubitable.”<sup>67</sup>

- **Various Non-Christian Religions Contain Such Ideas or an Ancient Wisdom Which Can Benefit Us Today**

This is more difficult to answer since the Bahá’í Faith on the one hand upholds all religions/cultures’ spiritual heritage originates, ultimately, with a Manifestation of God.<sup>68</sup> For example, Bahá’u’lláh states that:

The light which these souls [The Prophets and Messengers of God] radiate is responsible for the progress of the world and the advancement of its peoples. They are like unto the leaven which leaveneth the world of being, and constitute the animating force through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest.<sup>69</sup>

Yet, on the other hand, the Bahá'í Faith also maintains that all religions/cultures decline and that they, eventually, become obsolete and malfunctioning.<sup>70</sup> In other words, although the various religions/cultures still contain an ancient wisdom, to some degree, they are, nonetheless, seen as inadequate to solve the world's current spiritual and global problems. However, the Bahá'í Faith also stresses "unity in diversity" and advocates the richness and preservation of the great variety of humanity's cultural heritage.<sup>71</sup>

### • Humanity Faces a Spiritual and Societal Revolution, A New Age

This is probably one of the most fundamental features of the Bahá'í Faith and the very title of Esslemont's book—*Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*—clearly conveys this theme.<sup>72</sup> The Bahá'í writings repeatedly emphasize that humanity is facing an unprecedented spiritual, societal, and global revolution, and that it is at the threshold of a new age, a new world order, the lesser- and the Most Great Peace, and ultimately, the Kingdom of God on Earth.<sup>73</sup>

Once again similar problems of comparison emerge as with the previous review. The Bahá'í Faith seems to fit on a number of points, but then again, it clearly rejects such crucial categories as pantheism, monism, and reincarnation.

Consequently, since: a) the definition of the New Age is highly problematic and contains a variety of extreme positions, and b) that the Bahá'í Faith seems to both fit and not fit, it comes as no surprise that it is possible to both identify it with, and to separate it from, the NAP.

However, although such comparisons clearly are possible to make, they do not establish causation i.e., they do not clarify the problem of historical influences. For example, if one upholds that the NAP is a relatively new phenomenon ([19]60s-70s), then the Bahá'í Faith is a considerably older phenomenon, since it originated a century earlier (1844-63). If one states that NAP has its roots in the synthesis created by Theosophy during the nineteenth century, one is faced with yet another problem, since the Bahá'í Faith not only emerged several decades before the birth of the Theosophical Society (1875), but that it also arose outside a Euro-American context. In addition, if one maintains that the NAP has "a long tradition in the west," with roots in Hellenism, then one comes across still another problem, since Hellenism expanded not only to ancient Persia (where Zoroastrianism was a state religion at the time being), but all the way to India (where both Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism were already established). Hence, in order to explain some of the similarities and differences between the NAP and the Bahá'í Faith, one ought rather to trace its influences elsewhere, especially the Bábí Faith, Shaykhism, Shí'í Islam, Sufism, Neo-Platonism etc.

In the comparisons between the NAP and the Bahá'í Faith some crucial "theoretical" differences were noticed, but it should also be mentioned that there also are some "practical," "structural," or "organizational" differences. As was mentioned earlier, the NAP is a very loosely structured phenomenon. According to Heelas, it should

not be taken to imply that the New Age is in any sense an organized entity. Far from being centrally administered, it is comprised of diverse modes of operation: well-organized NRMs and communities...networks...one-to-one paths within...centers...the week-end training seminars, holiday homes...festivals...gatherings...shops...clubs...schools.<sup>74</sup>

Thus, the NAP is structured in what has been labeled a "meta-network" (a net-work of net-works) rather than as a unified and hierarchical organization.<sup>75</sup> In other words, and taken as a whole, in the NAP there is:

- no founder
- no holy canon
- no central doctrine<sup>76</sup>
- no myth or ritual<sup>77</sup>

The Bahá’í Faith, on the other hand, which claims a new and unique revelation from God, clearly recognizes and exhibits:

- two specific founders (Báb/Bahá’u’lláh)
- a holy and vast canon
- a unified set of doctrines<sup>78</sup>
- relatively few myths and rituals<sup>79</sup>

In contrast to the NAP, the Bahá’í Faith moreover consists of:

- a well-defined organization and administration that is established on local, national, and international levels. Nevertheless, there is no priesthood, but individual Bahá’ís elect their representatives democratically.<sup>80</sup>

In comparing the NAP with the Bahá’í Faith, the latter resembles more the so called “classical” religions (especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), and, to some degree, the NRMs, although such comparisons also are highly problematic. It is possible to in this context consider what Wittgenstein called “family resemblances”<sup>81</sup> between various themes (as we have seen in the comparisons earlier), but such a resemblance can be found in, and between, other religions as well.

### The New Age Phenomenon Evaluated From a Bahá’í Perspective

Since the NAP is so highly complex and elusive, it is not very easy to evaluate it. However, the most important points of agreements between the NAP and the Bahá’í Faith seem to be Spangler’s third and fourth levels of the New Age: i.e., that it is “an image of change” (transformation/paradigm shift),<sup>82</sup> and that it may reflect the birth of the sacred and a resacralizing of life on earth and that the “new age is fundamentally a spiritual event”. Indeed, the very idea of “transformation” is central to the Bahá’í Faith. Thus, Bahá’u’lláh, for example, asks the following question:

Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall effect both its inner life and external conditions?<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, it is interesting that, according to Spangler, “the phrase *an emerging planetary culture* is replacing the phrase *an emerging new age*”<sup>84</sup> and similarly, that Kyle states that:

Global unity is central to New Age political thought and will receive further attention later. New Agers see the world as already unified by modern transportation and communication systems. But they also seek global political unification. There is to be a new world order characterized by internationalism.... The notion of global is basic to the New Age vision. Such a concept goes by a number of names: planetary unity, planetization, world order, planetary consciousness, and the new global society.<sup>85</sup>

Such views are in complete harmony with the Bahá’í view.<sup>86</sup> However, a certain paradox with the NAP can be noticed, since on one hand the Western world has, especially since the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, become gradually more secularized, atheistic, and materialistic, and yet, on the other hand, the NAP seems to be an indication of an opposite trend—an increasing process of spiritualization.

It is possible that this paradox may be solved by the same token as the concepts of “an old” and “new world order,” and in this context, the term “order” may be seen as interchangeable with the term “age.” In the Bahá’í writings, however, the emergence of the two orders, or ages, are not seen as mutually exclusive, but are rather evaluated as two simultaneous and parallel processes. For example, according to Shoghi Effendi:

We stand on the threshold of an age whose convulsions proclaim alike the death-pangs of the old order and the birth-pangs of the new. Through the generating influence of the Faith announced by Baha’u’llah this New World Order may be said to have been conceived. We can, at the present moment, experience its stirrings in the womb of a travailing age—an age waiting for the appointed hour at which it can cast its burden and yield its fairest fruit.<sup>87</sup>

This present age is seen as being on the “threshold of an age” i.e., between two world orders—the “death-pangs of the old order” and the “birth-pangs of the new.” A similar expression is found in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh where he says: “Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead.”<sup>88</sup> These and earlier passages by the Bahá'í authors indicate that the world, at present, is in a major phase-transition between two major cycles. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi also refers to this present age as the “Age of Transition.”<sup>89</sup>

This age is furthermore represented not only by two opposing world orders, but also by two major concurring processes. Again, to quote from Shoghi Effendi:

A twofold process, however, can be distinguished, each tending, in its own way and with an accelerated momentum, to bring to a climax the forces that are transforming the face of our planet. The first is essentially an integrating process, while the second is fundamentally disruptive. The former, as it steadily evolves, unfolds a System which may well serve as a pattern for that world polity towards which a strangely-disordered world is continually advancing; while the latter, as its disintegrating influence deepens, tends to tear down, with increasing violence, the antiquated barriers that seek to block humanity's progress towards its destined goal. The constructive process stands associated with the nascent Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and is the harbinger of the New World Order that Faith must ere long establish. The destructive forces that characterize the other should be identified with a civilization that has refused to answer to the expectation of a new age, and is consequently falling into chaos and decline.<sup>90</sup>

It is interesting to note that both processes are being described as “accelerating” and that they are reaching a climax which will be “transforming the face of our planet.” The first process is described as “integrating” and “constructive” whereas the latter is depicted as “disruptive” and “disintegrating.” Furthermore, the former process is associated with the “nascent Faith of Bahá'u'lláh” and the “New World Order.” The second process, although portrayed as “destructive,” is seen in a positive light in that it tears down the “antiquated barriers that seek to block humanity's progress towards its destined goal.” This barrier is hence related to a civilization which has “refused to answer to the expectation of a new age.” This last sentence could refer to: 1) the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in general, and/or 2) the reception of Bahá'u'lláh's letters, sent to various religious and political leaders in the nineteenth century.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, rather than viewing the NAP as an isolated phenomenon, as a “faddish”, a “sub-culture,” a Western “post-modern” or “post-Christian” phenomenon, or even just a cultural shift or paradigm shift, it could be viewed within a much larger context—in the Bahá'í context of the transition of the old and new world orders, that mankind is coming of age, of religious cycles, and ultimately, within the context of progressive revelation.<sup>92</sup>

That this age is unique in a Bahá'í perspective is clear since 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that “This age is indeed as a hundred other ages.”<sup>93</sup> It is therefore appropriate to end this paper, written at the end of this century, with a quote from 'Abdu'l-Bahá who, at the beginning of this century, said:

Now the new age is here and creation is reborn. Humanity hath taken on new life. The autumn hath gone by, and the reviving spring is here. All things are now made new... Renewal is the order of the day. And all this newness hath its source in the fresh outpourings of wondrous grace and favour from the Lord of the Kingdom, which have renewed the world. The people, therefore, must be set completely free from their old patterns of thought, that all their attention may be focused upon these new principles, for these are the light of this time and the very spirit of this age.<sup>94</sup>

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### Notes

- 1) Schaefer 1995:35-49 (originally published in German in 1992).
- 2) Lambden 1994:72.
- 3) Lambden 1994:72, italics added.
- 4) See Dodenhoff 1997. The author of this article and Dodenhoff produced a paper each on the topic of the NAP and the Bahá'í Faith for the 14th (Manchester, UK) and 15th (Wilmette, USA) Irfán Colloquia in 1997 respectively.
- 5) Rather than taking side in the debate whether "New Age" is to be labeled a "movement" or "religion" this author have decided to here use the more neutral term the "New Age Phenomenon," henceforth abbreviated as the NAP.
- 6) Matson 1979:49-51; Figl 1993:78-89.
- 7) Kyle 1995:59, clarification and italics added.
- 8) See e.g., Hammer 1997:25, 83-84.
- 9) Lambden 1994:71-72 also mentions in a footnote that the LSA of Warwick produced a leaflet entitled *The New Age* in order to approach adherents of the 'new age.'
- 10) See e.g., Cohn 1993 and McGinn 1979.
- 11) Lewis & Melton 1992:x.
- 12) Kyle 1995:6, 41, 66, 78, 214; Hammer 1997:302-305.
- 13) Kyle 1995: 198-201.
- 14) Hammer 1997:289-293.
- 15) Lewis & Melton 1992:59.

- 16) Lewis & Melton 1992:18, italics added.
- 17) Most scholars in Lewis & Melton's book 1992 and Kyle 1995 categorize the New Age as "*The New Age Movement*" and compares it to New Religious Movements. Even Heelas uses the term "movement," which also is the title of his book 1996 *The New Age Movement*.
- 18) Hanegraaff 1997 and Hammer 1997:274 are more consistently using the term "The New Age religion," but Hammer also uses the term "The New Age movement" (p. 25). Rothstein alternates between the terms "movement" and "religion" and writes that "The New Age is . . . a religion of action" (p. 11, my translation). Both Hammer and Rothstein state that the New Age phenomena is a folktró "folk belief."
- 19) Kyle 1995.
- 20) Hammer 1997:23.
- 21) Kyle 1995:13. Arlebrand 1995 even includes satanism in his definition of New Age! Moreover, in Germany the term "New Age" has largely been replaced by the term Esoterik "esotericism" or Ganzheitlich "holistic." See Offermanns 1997:1.
- 22) e.g., Heelas 1996 describes New Age as the "religion of the Self."
- 23) Lewis & Melton 1992:3; Kyle 1995:46.
- 24) Spangler 1984:80-81; Farrell Bednarowski 1992:167; Kyle 1995:5-7.
- 25) For a discussion on the difficulties of defining "religion" see e.g., Clarke & Byrne 1993.
- 26) Lewis & Melton 1992:7.
- 27) See e.g., Bahá'u'lláh 1983b:200.
- 28) See e.g., 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1981:254-259.
- 29) e.g., Horace Holley who in 1913 entitled one of his works Baháism, the Modern Social Religion.
- 30) See e.g., 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1979:131-175, 1982a:107-108, 1982b:105-110; Aull 1988/89; Bartholomew 1989; Khursheed 1987
- 31) See e.g., Lewis 1997; Woodman 1997.
- 32) See e.g., Cole 1993.
- 33) For a more in-depth discussion on the theme of Bahá'í and syncretism see Stockman 1993.
- 34) Bahá'u'lláh 1983b:166.
- 35) Bahá'u'lláh 1983b:318, clarification added.
- 36) For a detailed analysis on the Bahá'í view on apophatic (negative) theology see Lambden 1997.
- 37) See e.g., Lundberg 1996.
- 38) Bahá'u'lláh 1986:113; Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1991:143.
- 39) For discussions on Bahá'í theology see e.g., Momen 1988; McLean 1992, 1997; Lundberg 1996. See e.g., Lundberg 1996; Stockman 1996.
- 40) For discussions on Bahá'í and the topic of evolution see 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982a:358-359; Lundberg 1996; Brown 1998.
- 41) See e.g., Hornby 1988:513-522.
- 42) Bahá'u'lláh 1983b:65, clarification added, 177-178.
- 43) For another comparison of similarities and differences between the Bahá'í Faith and the NAP see Schaefer 1995:45-48.
- 44) Hammer 1997:18-19, italics added.
- 45) Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1976:364, italics added.
- 46) Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1991:123
- 47) Bahá'u'lláh 1986:414-415.
- 48) Bahá'u'lláh quoted in Shoghi Effendi 1990:77.
- 49) Bahá'u'lláh 1983b:141, italics added.
- 50) 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982a:80, italics added.
- 51) 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982a:4, 89.
- 52) Shoghi Effendi 1990:72-73, italics added.
- 53) Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1976:345.
- 54) 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982a:140, italics added
- 55) See e.g., Bahá'u'lláh 1984:36-37; Cole 1984:12-13; Momen 1988:189-195; Lundberg 1996.
- 56) See e.g., Bahá'u'lláh 1983b:213. For a discussion on the decline of religion see Lundberg 1996.
- 57) Bahá'u'lláh 1983b:200.
- 58) See e.g., 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982a:363-364.
- 59) Bahá'u'lláh 1986:329; 498.
- 60) Bahá'u'lláh 1986:498.
- 61) 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982a: 80.
- 62) 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982a:80.
- 63) See e.g., Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1994.
- 64) Kyle 1995:90 writes that "Reincarnation and karma are bedrock New Age concepts." For a Bahá'í view on the concept of reincarnation see e.g., 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1981:281-289; Hornby 1988:536-538.

- 65) See Shoghi Effendi 1976:71.
- 66) See e.g., 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982a; Lundberg 1996.
- 67) 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1981:297-99.
- 68) Hornby 1988:543.
- 69) Bahá'u'lláh 1983b:156-157; Bahá'u'lláh 1986:455.
- 70) 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982a:10, 161, 179, 363-364, 407, 412.
- 71) See e.g., Lalonde 1994.
- 72) See Esslemont 1980; Lundberg 1996.
- 73) See Lundberg 1996.
- 74) Heelas 1996.
- 75) Kyle 1995:73, 129. For a discussion on New Age and networks and metanetworks see Miller 1989; York 1995.
- 76) Kyle 1995:75. Yet, as had been shown in this paper, a few New Age scholars, e.g., Lewis & Melton 1992; Hammer 1997, do see a set of core-principles. Peters 1991:57-90 summarizes the New Age in eight teachings: 1) holism, 2) monism, 3) the higher self, 4) human potentiality, 5) reincarnation, 6) evolution/transformation, 7) gnosis, and 8) a New Age Jesus. Similarly, Kyle 1995:197 states that "What unifies the New Age is its worldview and assumptions regarding reality, God, human nature, and the basis of the human predicament."
- 77) Kyle 1995:175-177, 197. Yet, scholars like Hammer 1997:17, 274-276 and Rothstein (in press) also see myths and rituals in the NAP.
- 78) For a discussion on one of these doctrines see e.g., Lundberg 1999.
- 79) MacEoin 1994; Walbridge 1996.
- 80) For a discussion on Bahá'í administration see Hornby 1988:1-43.
- 81) For a discussion on how Wittgenstein uses the term "family resemblance" see e.g., Wittgenstein. 1953; Fowler 1982.
- 82) Similarly, Kyle 1995:154 states that "Transformation is at the heart of the New Age."
- 83) Bahá'u'lláh 1983a:240-241, italics added.
- 84) Spangler 1984:38, italics added.
- 85) Kyle 1995:120-121, 122-125, italics added.
- 86) For a discussion on the Bahá'í view of a global civilization see e.g., Shoghi Effendi 1991.
- 87) Shoghi Effendi 1991:169.
- 88) Bahá'u'lláh 1983b:7.
- 89) Shoghi Effendi 1991:171.
- 90) Shoghi Effendi 1991:170, italics added.
- 91) See Bahá'u'lláh 1972.
- 92) See e.g., Lundberg 1996.
- 93) 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982b:111.
- 94) 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982b:252-253, italics added.