

Prayers and rituals in the Bahá'í Faith: A Tablet to Jináb-i-Mullá 'Alí-Akbar fí Arđđi'l-Álif

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Who was Mullá 'Alí-Akbar-i-Ardistání?

The historical information about Mullá 'Alí-Akbar-i-Ardistání that the authors were able to find are scanty. However they are enough to give an understanding of the allusions of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet addressed to him. Mullá 'Alí-Akbar was almost certainly born in Ardistán, a town 2000 meters high, located at the southern foothills of the Karkas mountain chain, adjacent to Dasht-i-Kavír, the central Iranian desert, not far from Káshán and Náyin. This town, not very important to day, in the past used to be a major city on the route of the caravans and it has been described as the birthplace of the Sasanian king of kings, Khusraw I, entitled the Just (531-578 ce) or Anúshírván (of the immortal soul).

In his youth Mullá 'Alí-Akbar lived in Işfáhán, the renowned artistic city in which Avicenna resided and taught in the twelfth century. In Işfáhán he was a pupil of Mulla Şádiq-i-Khurásání (Balyuzi, *The Báb* 77), known as Muqaddas and later entitled by Bahá'u'lláh Ismu'lláhu'l-Aşdaq, one of the four Hands of the Cause appointed posthumously by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials* 5-8). In that town he embraced the Cause of the Báb in 1845 (Manuchehri) together with his master, when Mullá Husayn-i-Buşhrú'í (1813-1849), the first of the 18 disciples of the Báb, known as Letters of the Living, went there after having been dismissed by the Báb in Shíráz. Immediately after his conversion Mullá 'Alí-Akbar went with Mulla Şádiq to Kirmán and then to Shíráz. In this town Mullá Şádiq and his pupil met Mullá Muḥammad-'Alí Barfurúshí, entitled Quddús (1822-1849), the most illustrious among the Letters of the Living. The three Bábís began to teach the new Faith and to put in practice its precepts. Particularly, Mullá Şádiq carried out the Báb's instruction to modify the adhán, the call to prayer, adding

the words: “I bear witness that He whose name is ‘Alí Qabl-i-Muḥammad [‘Alí preceding Muḥammad, the Báb] is the servant of Baqíyyatu’lláh [the Remnant of God, Bahá’u’lláh]” (Balyuzi, *The Báb* 78). This action horrified the pious Muslims of the town, who were already upset because of the people converted to the new Movement through the efforts of the three Bábís, and aroused their anger against the one who had performed that action and his two friends. The three men were arrested, beaten, their beards were burnt, their noses were pierced, through this incision a cord was passed, and with this halter they were led through the streets of the city. Therefore he and his two companions were “the first to suffer persecution on Persian soil for the sake of the Cause of God” (Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 414). Immediately after this punishment, the three men met the Báb in the vicinity of Darvázih Sa’dí (Door of Sa’dí), when He came back to Shíráz from His pilgrimage to Mecca (Muḥammad-‘Alí Faízi). Later on, Mullá Şádiq and Quddús left Shíráz and Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar remained there, hiding himself in ruins outside the town (see Balyuzi, *The Báb* 78n). In those circumstances he addressed a letter to the Báb. In that letter he wrote that he had taught the Cause in three towns, Yazd, Kirmán and Shíráz, asked permission to meet the Báb and a guidance on his behavior. From Shíráz Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar returned to Ardistán where he continued serving the Faith of the Báb, while keeping afar from any dangerous situation (Ḥusaynî 269).

According to Sepehr Manuchehri, an expert of Azalism, “after that event he adopted taqiyyah and never again involved himself at times of danger” (3:3, see also Mazandarani, *Kitáb Zuhur Al-Haqq* 3:103). *Taqiyyah*, sometimes translated as dissimulation, “denotes dispensing with the ordinances of religion in cases of constraint and when there is a possibility of harm” (Strothmann). Its upholders, especially among the Shi’ites, consider it as based on the Qur’an (see 3:28 and 16:106) as well as on Ḥadíth and juridical commentaries. *Taqiyyah* was not abrogated by the Báb, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes in His Tablet known in the West as “Tablet of Purity”:

The Báb, at the outset of His mission, explicitly prohibited tobacco, and the friends one and all abandoned its use. But since those were times when dissimulation was permitted (*zaman-i-taqiyyih búd*, lit.: it was the time of dissimulation), and every individual who abstained from smoking was exposed to harassment, abuse and even death—the friends, in order not to advertise their beliefs, would smoke. (SWAB 147, no. 129, *Muntakhabátí* 144)

Therefore Mullá 'Alí-Akbar cannot be condemned for having adopted *taqiyyah*. Moreover Shaykh Kázim-i-Samandar from Qazvín (1844-1918), one of the so called Bahá'u'lláh's apostles, and the son of Shaykh Muḥammad, entitled Nabíl, a devote follower of the Bab and His visitor in the fortress of Máh-Kú and Chihriq (see Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 3:88), writes that he was his pupil in Tabríz for two years (see Samandar 172, qtd. in Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís* 200). Evidently the Mullá had a good reputation among the Bábís and Bahá'ís. Samandar writes moreover:

After the declaration of the Abhá Beauty, he [Mullá 'Alí-Akbar] became hesitant for a while, sunk in his own thoughts. Even in a Tablet, He [Bahá'u'lláh] commanded me to bear a message to him, this great teacher of mine. But before long the Will of God prevailed, and that sagacious, acute and subtle man, subsequent to deep investigation, came through the test and attained the highest degree of certitude and knowledge, and engaged in glorifying his Lord and teaching His Faith until he passed away. (172, qtd. in Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís* 200).

Mullá 'Alí-Akbar, who lived for a long time after the Báb's martyrdom (see Ḥusaynī 269), left a number of manuscripts, comprising a collection in three volumes of works by the Báb, that he copied in 1845. The Hand of the Cause of God Mr. Abu'l-Qásim Faizí (1906-1980), who examined them before they were dispatched to Shoghi Effendi in the Holy Land, writes: "These books were written in black ink, but whenever the many references were made to 'Bahá,' this word always appeared in red. During the very first year of His ministry, the Báb had instructed His amanuensis to write in this manner in order that those who had no time or patience to read all His Writings would be helped to see this Name" (8).

The circumstances of the Tablet's revelation

Bahá'u'lláh has seemingly addressed this Tablet to Mullá 'Alí-Akbar in that time when he was "sunk in his own thoughts" (Samandar 172), with the intention of purifying him through His vivifying Word "from the defilement of the superstitious" (T1). This Tablet should thus have been written in the Baghdad period (1853-1863).

Those were difficult years for the Bábís. The Báb had been shot, all the greatest exponents of His Faith had been martyred, and the one who had been provisionally appointed by the Báb as

“a figure-head (*marja‘-i-ismíy-i-ahl-i Bayán*, lit. figure-head of the people of the Bayán) pending the manifestation of the Promised One” (GPB 28-9, *Kitáb-i-qarn-i-badí‘* 89), that is, Mírzá Yahyá Núrí (1831-1912), a half-brother of Bahá’u’lláh, was not able to act as the central figure of the community. Bahá’u’lláh writes of this period.

Upon Our arrival in Iraq We found the Cause of God sunk in deep apathy and the breeze of divine revelation stilled. Most of the believers were faint and dispirited, nay utterly lost and dead. (TB 131)

During His absence from Baghdad the situation worsened. Shoghi Effendi writes: “Such was the decline in their fortunes that they hardly dared show themselves in public. Kurds and Persians vied with each other, when confronting them in the streets, in heaping abuse upon them, and in vilifying openly the Cause which they professed” (GPB 125). As soon as Bahá’u’lláh came back to Baghdad from His retirement in Kurdistan, He arose to regenerate the Bábí community. This Tablet was probably written in this time and can be numbered among the many exhortations He addressed to the Bábís to renew and readdress their faith.

The Tablet to Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar as a path towards reunion with the Lord

Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar, a devote follower of the Báb, who had endured a harsh persecution on His path, is now “immersed in the seas of doubt and passion” (T1) and Bahá’u’lláh wants to purge him “from the defilement of the superstitious” (T1). He “droneth round the Fire” (T2) and his position is so grievous that, as Bahá’u’lláh writes, “the whirlwinds of wrath and the tempests of rage were ready to blow from thy doubts upon all beings. Fear thou God, then beg thou forgiveness seventy times, so that He may forgive thee by His grace” (T6). Despite his errors, Bahá’u’lláh consoles him saying that if he will put his trust in God and will be God-fearing, God will turn that Fire into “a light for... [him], and a mercy upon... [him], and a safety to the worlds” (T2). His doubts depend on the fact that he relies on human beings, who are as fallible as he is, whereas he should rely only on the guidance of the Manifestation of God. This teaching, later codified as “free and independent search after truth,” occupies a central position among Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. As early as in the Seven Valleys He writes: “O My Brother, journey upon these planes in the spirit of search

(*taḥqíq*), not in blind imitation (*taqlíd*) A true wayfarer will not be kept back by the bludgeon of words (*kalamát*), nor debarred by the warning of allusions (*ishárat*)” (SV 24, *Haft Vádí* 116). Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar has thus fallen into error because he did not purify his “heart from all allusions (*ishárat*)... and from the words (*kalamát*) of the people of the Qur’án” (T7). He should rather look “with... [his] inward eyes the proof through which... [his] faith hath been previously confirmed”, he should not “question anyone about this,” and should be content “with what is revealed on the part of... [his] Lord” (T7). In the days of God’s revelation, most religious leaders are “wrapt in the dense veils of the self and are among the heedless. And whosoever questions such people as these is like unto one born blind who questions another born blind” (T7). Bahá’u’lláh writes to Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar that He has perceived from him “the flavor of the ancient allusions (*ishárat*) of them to whom the Qur’án was given, allusions about references to the vicegerency (*wisáyyat*)... wherefore... [he] was saddened” (T9). He adds: “Hast thou not heard that He liveth in the All-Glorious Horizon and hath no need of a vicegerent (*waṣí*) after His Revelation?” (T10).

The concepts of vicegerent and vicegerency mentioned in this sentence deserve an explanation. The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* defines the word *waṣí* as “a theological term in Shí‘ism variously rendered as legatee, executor, successor or inheritor” and explains that it “was first used to designate ‘Alí as the inheritor of Muhammad’s worldly possessions (such as his books and weapons) and of his political and spiritual authority” and later on to designate “al-Ḥasan and the other *imáms*, all of whom are *awṣiyá’*” (Kohlberg). This concept is very important, because the *waṣí* is the One who comes after the Manifestation of God and is invested with the authority of guiding the community in its pursuing the goals set by the Manifestation of God. An incomplete understanding of this concept in the past has given rise throughout the centuries to many divisions in religions born to be instruments of spiritual unity.

In the years when Bahá’u’lláh addressed this Tablet to Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar the Bábí community did not know who was the vicegerent/successor (*waṣí*) of the Báb, because, as Shoghi Effendi points out, “a successor or vicegerent the Báb never named, an interpreter of His teachings He refrained from appointing” (GPB 28). He had, instead, written in the Persian Bayán: “apparently, since in this cycle neither prophets (*nabí*) nor vicegerents (*waṣí*) were mentioned, [these titles] are ascribed to the believers, till the Day of Resurrection when each will call the Tree of Reality as he will like to (*va dar zaváhir chunkih*

dhikr-i-nabí va vaší dar ín kuúr ni-mí-gardad, bi-muminín i láq mí-shavad, illá yawm-i-qiyámat kih har-kas rá shajjariy-i-Ḥaqqát bi har ism kih khawhad dhikr mí-kunad» (6:14). However, Mírzá Yaḥyá, who, as has been said, the Báb had simply named “a figure-head pending the manifestation of the Promised One” (GPB 28-9), surreptitiously suggested that he was the successor of the Báb. He openly claimed this station only in the Adrianople period (1863-1868), when he began proclaiming to be the “successor of the Báb (*vašíy-i-musallam*, lit. indisputable vigerent),” and to pride himself “on his high sounding titles of Mir’atu’l-Azaliyyih (Everlasting Mirror), of Subh-i-Azal (Morning of Eternity), and of Ismu’l-Azal (Name of Eternity) (GPB 114, *Kitáb-i-qarn-i-badí’* 241). Therefore Bahá’u’lláh explained in His “Lawḥ-i-Siráj,” revealed in Adrianople:

In these days the leaders of the Bayán foolishly quote and have quoted, to demonstrate their truth, the same proofs that were quoted by the worst of the people of the Qur’án, for instance, the concept of vice-regency (*vişáyat*), a concept that My previous Manifestation has utterly effaced from the Book, as everyone knows, and beside the Letters and the Mirrors nothing has been revealed by the Pen of the Merciful in the Bayán. (7: 40-1, provisional translation by the authors)

It seems that Bahá’u’lláh intends here to warn Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar against the nefarious influence of Mírzá Yaḥyá and his upholders. Bahá’u’lláh confirms His previous words thus:

Yeah, God hath mirrors (maráyá) for Himself wherein He may shine to themselves for themselves, if they are placed before the sun and its rays... And they speak of the splendor of the sun, if they are placed before it and if they remain where they were beforehand. When they depart, the light returns unto its source and place, and with the mirrors the veils remain. (T11)

These words also deserve an explanation. The Báb had named a “hierarchy (*marátib-i-rúḥání*, lit. spiritual grades)” of “‘Mirrors’ (*maráyá*)... ‘Guides’ (*adillá*) and ‘Witnesses’ (*shuhadá*),” but all these people “had either been put to the sword, or hounded from their native soil, or bludgeoned into silence” (GPB 89, *Kitáb-i-qarn-i-badí’* 200). Bahá’u’lláh now states that the authority conferred by the Manifestation of God to His hierarchy also depends on their faithfulness. If they turn their back to His guidance, they lose any authority. This

happened to Bahá'u'lláh's son, Muḥammad-'Alí (1853-1937, see Taherzadeh, *Covenant* 125). He had been chosen to succeed 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the leadership of the Bahá'í community. But since he rebelled against the will of his Father, he lost all his rights, according to Bahá'u'lláh's words: "Should he for a moment pass out from under the shadow of the Cause, he surely shall be brought to naught'." (qtd. in WT 6).

Bahá'u'lláh also explains that the station (*maqám*) of "true believer (*mawqin*)"

is not specially set aside for anyone at the exception of any other one. By God, the True One, in this Day should all creatures turn themselves towards the lights of the sun that shine above the All-Glorious Horizon with the ornament of God, the Omnipotent, the Exalted, the Mighty, the splendor of the lights of the sun would be reflected in them and none would deny it, except those who are ignorant and far removed and other similar to them. (T11)

The criterion is very simple: a "true believer" is whoever turns his heart towards the Manifestation of God, "the sun that shine[s] above the All-Glorious Horizon with the ornament of God" (T11), and is able to conform to the following exhortation:

Beware lest thou lookest at Me through the eyes of anyone but Me and if thou wishest to know Me, look at Me through My eyes and thou wilt not know Me through anything but those, although thou ponderest so that thou mayest know Me till the end that none among the reckoners can reckon. (T12)

This exhortation refers to a Muslim tradition, known as *ḥadīth an-nawáfil* (*nawáfil*, sing. *náfilih*, supererogatory prayer), and also *Ḥadīth at-taqarrub*, that is, of the approaching to God (*taqarrub*), that recites:

Allah's Apostle said, 'Allah said, "I will declare war against him who shows hostility to a pious worshipper of Mine. And the most beloved things with which My slave comes nearer to Me, is what I have enjoined upon him; and My slave keeps on coming closer to Me through performing Nawafil (praying or doing extra deeds besides what is obligatory) till I love him, so I become his sense of hearing with which he hears, and his sense of sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he grips, and his leg with

which he walks; and if he asks Me, I will give him, and if he asks My protection (Refuge), I will protect him; (i.e., give him My Refuge) and I do not hesitate to do anything as I hesitate to take the soul of the believer, for he hates death, and I hate to disappoint him.” (al-Bukhārī, *ṣaḥīḥ* 8.76.509; see Furúzánfar, *Aḥadīth*, no. 148)

This tradition implies that a seeker who strictly adheres to the religious laws will be able to approach to God to the point that he will lose his own qualities and acquire His attributes. This condition opens the eye of the heart, that is the capacity of perceiving spiritual reality, beyond any mental and intellectual category, and opens the way towards higher levels of spiritual progress. In this condition the spiritual seeker is capable of recognizing the Manifestation of God as disguised as he may appear.

The “Reunion Prayer”

At this point the second part of the Tablet to Jináb-i-Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar fí Arḍi’l-Álif begins, known in the Arab and Persian-speaking worlds as *ṣalát-i-ḥájat*, the prayer of the needs. This name may have been inspired by the following words at the end of the Tablet:

I swear by the life of Him Whom God shall make manifest, whoever performs this action wholly for the sake of his Lord and rid of all attachment to all else except Him, verily God can satisfy his wants (*hawá’ij*, pl. di *ḥájat*) and shall raise him up on the day of resurrection in such wise that the company of the favoured angels will be bewildered. (28)

The Bahá’í scholar ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd Ishráq Khávarí (1902-1972), who quotes this prayer in his celebrated anthology of Bahá’í writings entitled *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání*, summarized these words as follows: “Let him then raise his head, and ask from God whatever he desireth (*Ḥájat-i-khud*)” (7:135). Bahá’u’lláh also adds:

Verily, We have instructed and warned thee, that thou mayest attain unto the presence (liqá’) of thy Lord and mayest not be deprived of what is better for thee than the treasures of the heavens and the earth. (T28)

Therefore this prayer may also be considered as a prayer asking God for the greatest bounty: arriving at the presence of, and recognizing His Manifestation in His Day. The meaning of

the “Presence of God,” or reunion with God is explained in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*:

whosoever, and in whatever Dispensation, hath recognized and attained unto the presence of these glorious, these resplendent and most excellent Luminaries, hath verily attained unto the “Presence of God (*Liqá'u'lláh*)” Himself, and entered the city of eternal and immortal life. (KI 142, m 151, *Kitáb-i-Musta áb* 111)

Therefore this prayer may be also called *ṣalat-i-Liqá'*, the “Reunion Prayer.” It is an invitation to the mystic nuptials with the Lord, “the Best-Beloved of every understanding heart” (PM 104, no. LXV, m 2).

In this perspective, the instructions comprised in this prayer become reminiscent of such ancient, or even modern, rituals as the vestition of the bride to be presented to her groom in the day of their wedding or the vestition of the priest before his celebration of a rite. First, detaching oneself “from all things” (T13), performing the “ablutions with clear and pure water” (T13), hands and face (T14, 15), perfuming oneself and wearing the best clothes (T17), then turning towards the Qiblih (T17), standing “firm” in one’s “place” (T18), “with manifest poise and dignity” (T18), then raising one’s hands “towards God” (T18) and taking “three paces forward” towards the ideal reunion place (T20, 22, 24), then prostrating oneself before His beauty (T26), and finally silently invoking Him from one’s innermost heart (T28).

Mystical meanings can also be ascribed to the prescriptions contained in this prayer. They may be read as a description of the mystical path leading towards the reunion with the Divine. Detaching oneself “from all things” and performing the ablutions is a clear reference to the purifying connotations of the purgative way. Perfuming oneself and wearing the best clothes is a preparation to the acquisition of virtues, an acquisition that is perfected while invoking God that He may turn the simple acts performed by one’s body into inner attitudes of purification and expression of fragrant virtues, typical of the illuminative way. The illumination is realized in “three paces” (T20), each referring to a different Manifestation of God. The first step refers to Moses, seemingly a symbol of detachment from the world of names and of the capacity of seeing God in each part of creation (T21). The second step refers to Jesus, seemingly a symbol of teaching the Faith, of detachment from the world of Attributes and spiritual

resurrection (T23). The third step refers to all the Prophets and the Chosen Ones (T25), seemingly anticipating the entrance into the Paradise of His Presence, a station in which the Manifestations of God “are all invested with the robe of Prophethood, and honoured with the mantle of glory” (Bahá’u’lláh, KI 152, m 161). Here one comes closer to the apex of the mystical way, the unitive way, followed by a prostration, a physical sign of the recognition of one’s nothingness, in one’s praise of God. At last, the final invocation, asking that one may avoid the risk of not understanding the signs of God:

I beseech Thee, O my God... not to reckon me among them who heard Thy voice and failed to answer Thy call, or them unto whom Thou hast revealed Thy Being in Thy most exalted manifestation and glorious splendour, and did not obey Thee. (T27)

This invocation is reminiscent of the fact the one’s spiritual progress on earth is always uncertain:

How often hath a sinner attained, at the hour of death, to the essence of faith, and, quaffing the immortal draught, hath taken his flight unto the Concourse on high! And how often hath a devout believer, at the hour of his soul’s ascension, been so changed as to fall into the nethermost fire! (KI 194, m 214)

Therefore this prayer may also be called the “Reunion Prayer,” in remembrance of the following advice by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Beseech thou from God’s infinite grace whatsoever thou desirest. But wert thou to heed my advice thou wouldst desire naught save entrance into the Abhá Kingdom” (in CC 2:231, no. 1741).

Rituals in the “Reunion Prayer”

In the Bahá’í Faith rites, that is, established, ceremonies, acts codified in the Holy Writings, are very few. The Universal House of Justice explains that

the Faith has certain simple rites prescribed by Bahá’u’lláh, such as the obligatory prayers, the marriage ceremony and the laws for the burial of the dead, but its teachings warn against developing them into a system of uniform and rigid rituals incorporating man-made forms of practices, such as exists in other religions where rituals usually consist of elaborate ceremonial practices performed by a member of the clergy... (on behalf of the Universal House

of Justice, 16 October 1979, in LG 478, no. 1573).

The rites associated with the “Reunion Prayer”, seemingly uncommon in the Bahá’í Writings, are thus an exception in the Bahá’í religious world. These rites are in part similar to those associated with the Obligatory Prayers, with a few differences.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “in every word and movement of the obligatory prayer there are allusions, mysteries and a wisdom that man is unable to comprehend, and letters and scrolls cannot contain” (in CC 2:233, no. 1748). And Shoghi Effendi explains that the “very few and simple” regulations associated with the Obligatory Prayers “are of a great spiritual help to the individual believer, in that they help him to fully concentrate when praying and meditating. Their significance is thus purely spiritual” (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 5 November 1934, in CC 2:237, no. 1759). The spiritual meanings of the physical gestures that a person, spontaneously or conforming to a prescribed rituals, performs during the prayer are also recognized in the Christian world. The hypertext *La formazione permanente “paradigma” della formazione iniziale* (Permanent Training: Paradigm of the Early Training) devotes an entire chapter to “The Body in Prayer.” It writes:

The golden rule of the body’s integration into prayer is... a progressive interiorization of all physical gestures into tranquility and unification, so that the whole person may be absorbed in prayer, all one’s being may become prayer. This unification may lead to a correct use of the physical gestures expressing one’s personal, deep and deeply felt, prayer as an adequate resource for a holistic prayer. One should thus aim at one’s unification in an attitude of utter receptivity and listening, in a prayerful and contemplative silence, implying for the mind and the heart to be unified towards God.

Performing the ablutions, turning towards the Qiblih, standing, raising one’s hands and prostrating are part of the rites of the daily Obligatory Prayers and of the repetition of the Greatest Name 95 times a day. Perfuming oneself, wearing a fine dress and advancing towards the Qiblih are new and typical of this prayer. Also the explicit prescriptions of an attitude of detachment “from all things” (T13) and of “manifest poise and dignity” (T18) are typical of this prayer.

“perform ablutions with clear and pure water...” (T13)

Ablutions as a purification rite are a feature of many

religions. The Bible for example prescribes that the priests “when they go into the tabernacle of the congregation, they shall wash with water, that they die not; or when they come near to the altar to minister, to burn offering made by fire unto the Lord” (Exodus 30:20, KJB). Another form of ablution among the Jews is the total immersion of one’s body in a pool filled with running water, called *mikvah* or *mikveh*, to become purified from such previous defilements, as for example a menstrual cycle, a childbirth, a nocturnal emission, or coming into contact with the dead or other ritually unclean objects. Christians use ablutions in the baptism rite, supposedly going back to the Pentecost Day (see Facts 2:38), in the rite of the washing of the feet in Maundy Thursday, as a remembrance of what Jesus did in the Last Supper (see John 13:4-5) and, symbolically, in the lavabo rite, when the priest washes his fingers with water while celebrating the Mass. Early Christians used to wash their hands before praying, either during a common rite or individually, in obedience to Paul’s exhortation “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). Muslims use ablutions (*wudú*), hands and face, as a preparation to their Daily Obligatory Prayers.

Bahá’í ablutions consist in washing the hands and the face in preparation for prayer (see KA 182, n34). The water should be pure, that is it should not be changed in colour, taste or smell (see *ibid.* 212, n105). The essential features of Bahá’í ablutions may be found in Shoghi Effendi’s “Synopsis and Codification of the Laws and Ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.” The relevant part is reproduced, integrated, in the footnotes, with explanations given in note 34 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas’ text.

- a) Ablutions must precede the recital of the Obligatory Prayers.
- b) For every Obligatory Prayer fresh ablutions must be performed.
- c) Should two Obligatory Prayers be offered at noon one ablution for both prayers is sufficient.
- d) If water is unavailable or its use harmful to the face or hands, the repetition, five times, of a specifically revealed verse is prescribed.
- e) Should the weather be too cold the use of warm water is recommended.
- f) If ablutions have been performed for other purposes, their

renewal prior to the recital of the Obligatory Prayer is not required.

g) Ablutions are essential whether a bath has been taken previously or not. (KA 36)

“turn thy face towards the Sanctuary of God [Qiblih, t.n.]” (T17)

The *Qiblih* (from the Arabic root *qabila*, to turn toward) is “the ‘Point of Adoration’, that is, the point to which the worshipper should turn when offering obligatory prayer” (in KA n34). Turning towards a direction considered as holy while praying is a common feature of many religions. The Jews pray turning towards the *sancta sanctorum* of Jerusalem Temple. Early Christians residing in Europe prayed turned towards East, that is, towards Jerusalem. In the Moslem world, initially the *Qiblih* was Jerusalem, but Muḥammad changed it later to Mecca and the Kaaba Shrine (see Koran 2:142-4).

The Bahá’í *Qiblih* is appointed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and in “Questions and Answers”:

Fear ye the Most Merciful and consider what He hath revealed in another passage. He said: “The Qiblih is indeed He Whom God will make manifest; whenever He moveth, it moveth, until He shall come to rest.” Thus was it set down by the Supreme Ordainer when He desired to make mention of this Most Great Beauty. (KA 68, m 137)

ANSWER: Facing in the direction of the Qiblih is a fixed requirement for the recitation of obligatory prayer, but for other prayers and devotions one may follow what the merciful Lord hath revealed in the Qur’án: “Whichever way ye turn, there is the face of God.” (KA 111, D14)

Shoghi Effendi explains that this orientation is

a physical symbol of an inner reality, just as the plant stretches out to the sunlight—from which it receives life and growth—so we turn our hearts to the Manifestation of God, Bahá’u’lláh, when we pray; and we turn our faces, during this short prayer, to where His dust lies on this earth as a symbol of the inner act. (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 24 June 1949, in CC 2:243, no. 1780)

“stand firm on your place” (T18)

People of all religions stand while praying, an attitude

denoting respect in many cultures. Jews stand while reciting the 19 blessings of the most important prayer in their liturgy, *Amidah* (*standing* prayer), and face the *sancta sanctorum* of Jerusalem Temple. Christians usually pray in their knees and with their hands joined. However, Catholics stand up, as a sign of special reverence, while listening to the words of the Bible during the Mass. The hypertext *La formazione permanente* explains that “the attitude of standing up while praying is emphasized in early Christianity as a sign of freedom, of priesthood, of participation to the resurrection of the Lord. Therefore it was forbidden praying on one’s knees in Easter Time.” Muslims stand up at the beginning of each “unity (*rak’ah*)” forming the Daily Obligatory Prayer (*ṣalat*).

In His “Reunion Prayer” Bahá’u’lláh says: “stand firm on your place (*qum mustaqarran*)” (T18) as in the Long Obligatory Prayer prescribes: “let him stand erect (*yaqúma mustaqíman*) and say” (KA 95, Arabic edition 35). The spiritual meaning of this physical gesture in the “Reunion Prayer” may be better understood in the light of Bahá’u’lláh’s own words. For example: “Thou seest Thy handmaiden, O my God, standing (*qámat*) before the habitation of Thy mercy” (*Prayers and Meditation* 147, *Munáját* 101), “Thou seest, O my Lord, Thy suppliant waiting (*qá’íman*) at the door of Thy bounty” (*Prayers and Meditation* 265, *Munáját* 178), “Aid me, O my Lord... to stand (*al-qíyam*) humbly at His door” (*Prayers and Meditation* 209, *Munáját* 142) and “I have stood (*qumtu*) at the door of Thy grace with utter self-effacement and complete abnegation” (*Prayers and Meditation* 55, *Munáját* 43). These words suggest the idea of a vassal presenting himself to his sovereign to both render homage and invoke his grace. Last but not least, Bahá’u’lláh repeatedly quotes Koran 83:6: “‘The Day when mankind shall stand before the Lord of the worlds (*yaqúmu annás li-rabbi’l-‘alamín*)’,” a verse alluding to the eschatological meeting with the Lord on the Day of Judgment, a verse fitting with the concept of this prayer as “Reunion Prayer.”

“raise thy hands towards God” (T18)

The meaning of praying with raised hands as both a request for assistance and an expression of praise is intuitive and thus is a feature of many religions. Psalm 141:2 recites: “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” Catholics raise their hands while praying according to the following verse: “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). The hypertext *La formazione*

permanente elucidates this gesture as follows:

All religions value the praying language of the hands. Hands raise towards the Lord in a searching (Psalms 62:5) or an offering attitude (Psalms 140:2), raised hands denote the evening sacrifice, open hands signify an attitude of intercession, according to Paul's advice (1 Timothy 2:8). Raised hands also are a sign of sacrificial offering...

...The Odes of Solomon remember the primitive meaning of this gesture: "I extended my hands and hallowed my Lord, For the expansion of my hands is His sign. And my extension is the upright cross. Hallelujah" (nos. 27 and 42).

Muslims raise their hands, upward towards the face, four times during each Daily Obligatory Prayer. Bahá'ís are invited to raise their hands in both their Medium and Long Obligatory Prayer. In the Medium Obligatory Prayer Bahá'u'lláh specifies that palms should be "upward toward the face" (KA 99) in the Muslim way, an instruction that is not repeated anywhere else. All the inner meanings of this gesture are confirmed in Bahá'u'lláh's words. In one of His prayers for the Fast He writes: "And these are my hands, O my Lord, uplifted toward the heaven of Thy favor and tender mercy. Wilt Thou, then, turn away this poor one...?" (in *Importance*, sec. 3, no. IV). Other references to hands raised in a supplicating attitude are: "Thou beholdest how... my hands are stretched out unto the heaven of Thy bestowals" (PM 182-3, no. CIX, m 1) and "Thou seest, O my Lord, how... my hands [are] raised up towards the heaven of Thy bounty and favor" (*Prayers and Meditations* 270, no. CLXXVI, m 9).

"fall down upon the ground" (T26)

Jews and Christians prostrate rarely. Jews call prostration *nefillat appayim*, that means "falling on one's face." They prostrate for example while reciting the liturgical poem known as *Aleynu* (we must) concluding the *musaf* (Additional offering or prayer) in the holy days of *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*. In the Catholic liturgy prostration (prone, sometimes with outstretched arms) is used during the imposition of the Holy Orders and during the liturgy of Good Friday. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains:

Adoration is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator. It exalts the greatness of the Lord who made us [Cf. Psalms 95:1-6] and the

almighty power of the Savior who sets us free from evil. Adoration is homage of the spirit to the “King of Glory” [Psalms 24:9-10], respectful silence in the presence of the “ever greater” God. (par. 2628)

The hypertext *La formazione permanente* explains prostration as follows: “Full prostration, prone... is a sign of utter humility before God, of a physical contact with the earth from which we come, of utter surrender in our adoration of God.” Muslim prostration (*sujúd*), used to glorify and praise God, is part of the rites of the Daily Obligatory Prayer at the end of each of its unities (*rak’at*).

The simple rules of Bahá’í prostration are explained in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

God hath granted you leave to prostrate yourselves on any surface that is clean, for We have removed in this regard the limitation that had been laid down in the Book; God, indeed, hath knowledge of that whereof ye know naught. (KA 22, m 10)

The spiritual meaning of this Bahá’í ritual act seems clear: recognizing one’s nothingness before the Omnipotent Lord. Bahá’u’lláh writes:

Behold me, then, O my God, fallen prostrate upon the dust before Thee, confessing my powerlessness and Thine omnipotence, my poverty and Thy wealth, mine evanescence and Thine eternity, mine utter abasement and Thine infinite glory. (PM 90, no. LVIII, m 5)

... when they beheld the lights of Thy countenance, they set their faces towards Thee, and prostrated themselves before Thy beauty, submissive to Thy greatness and severed from all things besides Thee. (in *Importance*, sec. 3, no. VI)

“perfume thyself” (T17)

Ancient Jews used incense and they had a special altar made “of shittim wood” (Exodus 30:1) to burn incense upon it. Exodus 30:22-29 describes the four “principal spices” that should be used to perfume the oil of the sacred anointment, employed to consecrate the shrine and the priests: “pure myrrh... sweet cinnamon... sweet calamus... cassia.” Whoever took part to divine worship was asked to “give... a sweet savour as frankincense, and flourish as a lily, and send forth a [good] smell” (Sirach 39:14). Christians also burn incense in the course

of several rites. Catholic priests incense the altar at the beginning of the Mass, burn incense at the elevation of the Sacred Host and the chalice after the consecration. Muslims perfume their bodies at the beginning of their pilgrimage to Mecca after having performed the specific ablutions and before they wear the special pilgrim garment. After that they cannot use any perfume. Muslims wear their best clothes and use perfumes whenever they meet a specially respected person. An episode of the Bahá'í history, reminiscent of this use, is described by Shoghi Effendi as follows:

One night, aware that the hour of her [áhirih's] death was at hand, she put on the attire of a bride, and anointed herself with perfume, and, sending for the wife of the Kalantar, she communicated to her the secret of her impending martyrdom, and confided to her her last wishes. Then, closeting herself in her chambers, she awaited, in prayer and meditation, the hour which was to witness her reunion with her Beloved. (GPB 74)

Wearing clean and perfumed dresses is a prescription of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

God hath enjoined upon you to observe the utmost cleanliness, to the extent of washing what is soiled with dust, let alone with hardened dirt and similar defilement. Fear Him, and be of those who are pure. Should the garb of anyone be visibly sullied, his prayers shall not ascend to God, and the celestial Concourse will turn away from him. Make use of rose-water, and of pure perfume; this, indeed, is that which God hath loved from the beginning that hath no beginning, in order that there may be diffused from you what your Lord, the Incomparable, the All-Wise, desireth. (KA 47, m 76)

The meaning of this prescription may be better understood in the light of the following words by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

It is even as a voice wondrously sweet, or a melody played: although sounds are but vibrations in the air which affect the ear's auditory nerve, and these vibrations are but chance phenomena carried along through the air, even so, see how they move the heart. A wondrous melody is wings for the spirit, and maketh the soul to tremble for joy. The purport is that physical cleanliness doth also exert its effect upon the human soul. (SWAB 146, m 129)

This special rite has also purely spiritual meanings, as may be

deduced from even a superficial search in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. He writes for example: "This is the Day whereon every sweet smelling thing hath derived its fragrance from the smell of My garment—a garment that hath shed its perfume upon the whole of creation" (GWB 29, sec. XIV, m 6). If the word "garment" is interpreted as "the Divine Revelation," the spiritual meaning of the act of perfuming oneself become more clear. Bahá'u'lláh mentions "the smell of the love of Thy Lord" (GWB 283, sec. CXXIX, m 10), "the sweet savors of holiness" (GWB 304, sec. CXXXIX, m 8), "the sweet smelling savor of purity and holiness" (GWB 306, sec. CXLI, m 4). He also raises the following prayer for his beloved ones:

Empower them also, O my God, to be as the rain that poureth down from the clouds of Thy grace, and as the winds that waft the vernal fragrances of Thy loving-kindness, that through them the soil of the hearts of Thy creatures may be clad with verdure, and may bring forth the things that will shed their fragrance over all Thy dominion, so that every one may perceive the sweet smell of the Robe of Thy Revelation. (PM 190, no. CXIII, m 2)

Thus perfuming oneself may be a symbol of an inner attitude of spiritual radiance, of living a virtuous life.

The prescription of using perfumes and wearing beautiful clothes is part of the elaborated rituals prescribed for the pilgrimage to the Houses of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad and of the Báb in Shíráz, rituals which are not yet obligatory for the present generations of Bahá'ís. As to the former, Bahá'u'lláh writes: "And when he [the pilgrim] reacheth it, let him put on his best clothes and then perform ablutions as God hath commanded him" (qtd. in MacEoin 155). As to the latter, He writes: "make use of the best of perfumes, then put on the best clothes you are able to afford" (qtd. *ibid.* 155).

"attire thyself with thy finest raiment" (T17)

Wearing special clothes in certain occasions is part of Jewish, Christian and Muslim rituals. Jews wear the *tallit* and the *kippah*. The *tallit*, the prayer shawl, is a rectangular piece of cloth, of various dimensions, usually white, more or less decorated, characterized by special fringes known as *tzitzit* attached to its four corners. The *tallit* is worn by any observant Jewish male above 13 years, who is a "son of the commandment" (*bar mitzvah*), that is, has become obligated to observe the commandments. These fringes are prescribed so that

the people wearing them “ may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them” (Numbers 15:39). The *kippah* is a skullcap traditionally worn by all observant Jewish men in worship places, as a sign that they recognize the superiority of God, that they accept the 613 commandments (*mitzvot*), that they identify themselves with the Jewish people. Both the *tallit* and the *kippah* are a sign that one is a Jew. Christian priests wear special paraments when they celebrate any religious function. These vestments are different in the different celebrated rites. Christians wear special clothes when they receive such Sacraments, as Baptism, “First Holy Communion,” Confirmation and Marriage (in the latter case, specially women). Muslim males wear a special garment (*iḥrám*) during the days of their pilgrimage to Mecca. The Muslim pilgrim garment is made of three elements: two clean, white and unhemmed sheets and a pair of sandals. One of the sheets is wrapped around the loins below the breast (*izár*), the other is thrown over the left shoulder (*ridá*). The two sheets are secured by a white belt. The sandals must not cover the ankles. The pilgrim garment *iḥrám* is a symbol of purity, of renunciation to evil and earthly possessions and of the equality of human beings before God.

Some of the symbolical meanings of clothes in the Bahá'í world may be better understood in the light of the following words by Bahá'u'lláh:

From among all created things He hath singled out for His special favor the pure, the gem-like reality of man, and invested it with a unique capacity of knowing Him and of reflecting the greatness of His glory. This twofold distinction conferred upon him hath cleansed away from his heart the rust of every vain desire, and made him worthy of the vesture with which his Creator hath deigned to clothe him. It hath served to rescue his soul from the wretchedness of ignorance.

This robe with which the body and soul of man hath been adorned is the very foundation of his well-being and development. Oh, how blessed the day when, aided by the grace and might of the one true God, man will have freed himself from the bondage and corruption of the world and all that is therein, and will have attained unto true and abiding rest beneath the shadow of the Tree of Knowledge! (GWB 77-8, sec. XXXIV, m 1-2)

The “robe” of human beings is seemingly the body of their

spiritual endowments, here described as their “unique capacity of knowing Him and of reflecting the greatness of His glory.” Bahá’u’lláh in His typical use of the metaphorical genitive associates the word “cloth” or similar with various spiritual attributes: the raiment of “fear of God” (GWB 290, sec. CXXXIV, m 3), the “robe of forbearance and justice” (GWB 304, sec. CXXXIX, m 8), “the vesture of forgiveness and bounty” (TB 69), “the robe of righteousness” (TB 59), “the vesture of true wisdom” (TB 166), “the raiment of goodly deeds” (TB 178, KA 46, m 73), “the vesture of high endeavour” (TB 257). Finally, the “metaphor of the fragrant ‘garment’ is frequently used in the Bahá’í Writings to refer to the recognition of the Manifestation of God and His Revelation” (in KA 164, n1). In this vein the Kitáb-i-Íqán says: “God grant that through His gracious and invisible assistance, thou mayest divest thy body and soul of the old garment, and array thyself with the new and imperishable attire” (KI 158, m 168). This condition is explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as follows: “As regards the teachers, they must completely divest themselves from the old garments and be invested with a new garment. According to the statement of Christ, they must attain to the station of rebirth—that is, whereas in the first instance they were born from the womb of the mother, this time they must be born from the womb of the world of nature” (TDP 96). This explanation is perfectly suitable to the “Reunion Prayer.”

“take three paces forward, turning towards God” (T20)

Procession is a very common rite in the Christian world. It provides for its participants to move along on a particular course in a devotional attitude. A Jew procession is the circumambulation of the Torah Scrolls (*haqqafa*), typical of the festivals of *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles. In the first six days of the nine days of this festival every day a circuit is made by the worshippers around the Torah Scrolls. The seventh day nine circuits are made, while chanting poetical hymns, comprising an invocation of personal and community salvation from any natural or social danger and from the hostility of the enemies and a remembrance of the greatness of patriarchs and great historical personages. Christian processions comprise priests and faithful, provide for hymns, psalmodies and litanies, the participants sometimes follow a statue or a sacred icon. Processions are done by Catholics in Palm Sundays, falling on the Sunday before Easter, as a remembrance of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem the days before His Passion, and in the festivity of “Corpus Domini,” recurring sixty days after

Easter, when the Church celebrates “Corpus Domini,” the Eucharist, the body—corpus—of Christ in the sacramental sign of bread. Muslims circumambulate the Ka’bah seven times, in a counter-clockwise direction (*tawáf*), during their Pilgrimage. Muslim pilgrims also run seven times back and forth between the two little hills of Safa and Marwa located near the Ka’ba (*say’*). These are the two hills where Hagar ran in search of water for her son Ishmael, a water that then miraculously gushed forth from the fount of Zemzem. Shiites do a procession during the day of *‘áshúrá*, commemorating the martyrdom of the Imam Ḥusayn which took place on 10 October 680 ce at Karbala.

Taking three steps towards the Qiblih, as prescribed in the “Reunion Prayer,” seems to be a symbol of the gradualness of spiritual growth. Bahá’u’lláh often describes spiritual lovers as pilgrims gradually moving towards the goal of their hearts, the Lord:

O Son of Love! Thou art but one step away from the glorious heights above and from the celestial tree of love. Take thou one pace and with the next advance into the immortal realm and enter the pavilion of eternity. Give ear then to that which hath been revealed by the pen of glory.
(HW 24, Persian no. 7)

In this vein He mentions people who have directed their steps “to the seat of Thy grace” (PM 118, no. LXXII, m 3), “towards Thy dearly-loved Sanctuary, and Thine adored and hallowed Court” (PM 175, no. CV, m 2), “towards the shores of Thy oneness, confessing Thy singleness, acknowledging Thy unity, and hoping for Thy forgiveness and pardon” (PM 221, no. CXXXIV, m 2), “towards the seat of Thy gracious favors” (PM 206, no. CXXI, m 1), people whom nothing can hinder “from directing... [their] steps towards the paths of Thy pleasure and the ways of Thy Cause” (PM 204, no. CXX, m 3). In this prayer the three steps are seemingly a symbol of the lover’s gradual advancement towards his Beloved One, through his adherence to the Divine commandments.

“detach thyself from all things” (T13)

It is the first prescription by Bahá’u’lláh to Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar and, as a ritual prescription, is typical of the Reunion Prayer. Detachment, its qualities, prerequisites and effects are described at length in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings.

As to its qualities, “the essence of detachment is for man to turn his face towards the courts of the Lord, to enter His

Presence, behold His Countenance, and stand as witness before Him” (TB 155). It is as “waters” flowing “out from the Supreme Pen” (ESW 12); it is a “breath” (ESW 9), which a worshiper will inhale if he were to ponder on whatever of Bahá’u’lláh’s prayers he is reciting; and a “well-spring” from which one will “quaff the wine of immortal life” (HW 41-2, Persian, no. 55).

As to its prerequisites, detachment is a “crown” with which Gods adorns “the heads of... [His] loved ones” (TB 57); an “atmosphere,” into which whosoever has quaffed “from the fingers of... [His] bounteousness the living waters which have enabled every one that hath partaken of them to rid himself of all attachment to any one save... [God]” and to fix his “gaze upon... [His] loving providence and... manifold gifts” (PM 240, no. CL, m 1) soars; a “light” which enlightens those who are “ablaze with the fire of love and affection” (TB 74) and with which God illumines the people He has attired “with the robe of righteousness” (TB 59); an “ocean” upon whose shores “such valiant souls as have passed beyond the sea of names... [pitch] their tents” (TB 57-8); a “mead,” where those who have passed “beyond the narrow retreats of... [their] evil and corrupt desires” and have advanced “into the vast immensity of the realm of God” abide (GWB 241, sec. CXV, m 2); a “Horizon” towards which people whose hearts have been brightened “with the splendors of the light of... [His] knowledge” set their faces (PM 275, no. CLXXVI, m 23). Detachment is as “lofty heights” attained by people who have quaffed “the wine of renunciation” (KI 238, m 267) and traversed “the vale of renunciation” (*Gems* 28, m 38); an “atmosphere” where whosoever has quaffed “from the fingers of... bounteousness the living waters which have enabled [him] to rid himself of all attachment to any one save... [Him]” (PM 240, no. CL, m 1) soars.

As to its effects, detachment is a “breath” (ESW 9), which would make one “have pity upon... [himself] and upon others” (ESW 9); “a breath... which if it were to be breathed full upon the world, all beings would renounce their lives, and sacrifice their souls” (KI 232, m 260). It is as “waters” that will “cleanse” one’s soul (*Summons* 74, sec. 1, m 143). It is a “Salsabil” that cleanse the eye of him who drinks it from all veils (KI 74, m 81); “a court,” that when one enters it, he “casteth away all signs, allusions, veils, and words, and beholdeth all things with an eye illumined by the effulgent lights which God Himself hath shed upon him... [and] seeth all differences return to a single word and all allusions culminate in a single point” (*Gems* 29, m 39). The blessed beings flying on its “wings” soar “beyond all created things” (KA 39, m 54); wing their flight “towards the loftiest

summits of... creation” (PM 103, no. LXIV, m 2); rise to such heights that “neither the vain imaginations of the learned, nor the multitude of the hosts of the earth... [succeed] in deflecting [them] from His cause”; and attain “the station which, as ordained by God, overshadoweth the entire creation” (GWB 34, sec. XIV, no. 18). Detachment is man’s “true and abiding glory” (SLH 47, sec. 1, m 88) and “true adornment” (SLH 61, sec. 1, m 119); a “breeze” that God expects to be “wafted from the meadows of... [human] hearts” (HW 38, Persian, no. 45); and a “path” in which Bahá’u’lláh invites His lovers to demonstrate what their “endeavors... will reveal” (HW 52), after He has revealed his vivifying Word unto them.

No wonder, thus, that detachment is such an important attitude for worshippers. Bahá’u’lláh writes: “whosoever reciteth... [the Obligatory Prayer], even one time, with a detached heart, will find himself wholly severed from the world” (in *Importance* sec. 1, no. VIII). Being detached while praying is also conducive to the greatest possible joy. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

*There is a pleasure in offering prayers that transcendeth all other pleasures, and there is a sweetness in chanting and singing the verses of God which is the greatest desire of all the believers, men and women alike. While reciting the Obligatory Prayer, one converseth intimately and shareth secrets with the true Beloved. No pleasure is greater than this, if one proceedeth with a detached soul, with tears overflowing, with a trusting heart and an eager spirit. Every joy is earthly save this one, the sweetness of which is divine. (in *Importance* sec. 2, no. XIII)*

Last but not least, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advises:

*When a man commenceth the recitation of the Obligatory Prayer, he should see himself severed from all created things and regard himself as utter nothingness before the will and purpose of God, in such wise that he seeth naught but Him in the world of being. This is the station of God’s well-favored ones and those who are wholly devoted to Him. Should one perform the Obligatory Prayer in this manner, he will be accounted by God and the Concurrence on high among those who have truly offered the prayer. (in *Importance* sec. 1, no. IX)*

This sentence seems to explain one of the reasons why detachment is prescribed while praying. It is an attitude conducive to the reunion with God, typical of a person who has

come to the “Valley of Unity” and thus “looketh on all things with the eye of oneness, and seeth the brilliant rays of the divine sun shining from the dawning-point of Essence alike on all created things, and the lights of singleness reflected over all creation” (SV 18). This is also the station, to which Bahá’u’lláh summons Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar just before revealing the Reunion Prayer:

Beware lest thou lookest at Me through the eyes of anyone but Me and if thou wishest to know Me, look at Me through My eyes and thou wilt not know Me through anything but those, although thou ponderest so that thou mayest know Me till the end that none among the reckoners can reckon.

“with manifest poise and dignity (*waqár wa sukún*)”
(T18)

Waqár is an Arabic word, deriving from the root *waqara*, “He, or it was, or became, still or motionless” (Lane, s.v. *waqara*). Wehr ascribes to this root also a connotation of “reverence” (1276). Lane defines *waqár* as “gravity, staidness, steadiness, and calmness” (s.v. *waqara*, *waqár*). Bahá’u’lláh describes “the dignity (*waqár*)” of the “station” of human beings (KA 63, m 123, Arabic edition 117).²

Sukún is an Arabic word, deriving from the root *sakana*, “it was, or became, still, calm, tranquilized, appeased, allayed...” (Lane, s.v. *sakana*). Wehr translates *sukún* as “calm, tranquility, peace” (488). Bahá’u’lláh refers to the Manifestations of God as abiding “upon the throne of peace (*sukún*) and certitude” (KI 53, m 57, *Kitáb-i-Musta‘áb* 41) and describes the “resignation (*taslím*) and serenity (*sukún*)” (ESW 75, *Lawḥ-i-Mubárák* 55) of the martyrs of the Faith before their torture-mongers, “the rock-like stability (*sukún*) of... [His] chosen ones” (GWB 341, sec. CLXIII, m 2, *Muntakhabátí* 219), “the patience (*ṣabr*), the calm (*sukún*), the resignation (*taslím*) and contentment” (ESW 74-5, *Lawḥ-i-Mubárák* 55) of the Mázindarání Bábí.

The locution *vaqár va sukún* is used by Bahá’u’lláh while describing the condition of the Bábí and Bahá’í martyrs, that He defines as characterized by “constancy... firmness... steadfastness... certitude... imperturbability (*tamkín*) and... dignity (*vakár va sukún*)” (ESW 87, *Lawḥ-i-Mubárák* 64). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ascribes this attitude to Ustád Báqir and Ustád AḤmad, two brothers natives of Káshán, that He describes as “tranquil, dignified (*vakár va sukún*), confident, strong in faith,

sheltered by the All-Merciful” (*Memorials* 72, *Tadhkirat* 117), while living as prisoners in ‘Akká.

Therefore, Bahá’u’lláh seemingly prescribes to Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar an attitude worthy of “the dignity (*vaqár*)” of the station of human beings (KA 63, m 123, Arabic edition 117), a station that requires them to submit “unto such restraints as will protect... [them] from... [their] own ignorance, and guard... [them] against the harm of the mischief-maker” (ibid.). In other words Bahá’u’lláh prescribes him to be submitted to the divine Will. At the same time He asks him to adopt the attitude of “serenity,” “calm,” and “stability,” typical of individuals ready to give their lives on His path.

This attitude is also recommend by Bahá’u’lláh for the recitation of the Obligatory Prayer. He writes that the worshipper should “regard himself as utter nothingness before the will and purpose of God, in such wise that he seeth naught but Him in the world of being” (in *Importance*, sec. 1, no. IX). And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that in this condition the worshipper “holdeth communion with God, seeketh to draw near unto Him, converseth with the true Beloved of one’s heart, and attaineth spiritual stations” (in CC 2:232, no. 1744), that is, he has realized that kind of prayer that Western mystics call contemplation.

The special meaning of the “Reunion Prayer”

Bahá’u’lláh writes at the end of this prayer:

I swear by the life of Him Whom God shall make manifest, whoever performs this action wholly for the sake of his Lord and rid of all attachment to all else except Him, verily God shall satisfy his wants and shall raise him up on the day of resurrection in such wise that the company of the favoured angels will be bewildered. (T28)

These words resemble the words of the more famous “Tablet of Aḥmad”: “Should one who is in affliction or grief read this Tablet with absolute sincerity, God will dispel his sadness, solve his difficulties and remove his afflictions” (BP 211).

The Bahá’ís associate the “Tablet of Aḥmad” with the following words by Shoghi Effendi:

These daily obligatory prayers, together with a few other specific ones, such as the Healing Prayer, the Tablet of Ahmad, have been invested by Bahá’u’lláh with a special

potency and significance, and should therefore be accepted as such and be recited by the believers with unquestioning faith and confidence, that through them they may enter into a much closer communion with God, and identify themselves more fully with His laws and precepts. (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 10 January 1936, qtd. in BP 208)

The “Reunion Prayer” could be one of these prayers “invested by Bahá’u’lláh with a special potency and significance.” Indeed this prayer summarizes the essential prerequisites of prayer explained in the Bahá’í writings.

Bahá’í prayer is in the first place a spiritual obligation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “It behoveth the servant to pray to and seek assistance from God, and to supplicate and implore His aid” (in CC 2:232, no. 1746) and explains:

Know thou, verily, it is becoming in a weak one to supplicate to the Strong One, and it behooveth a seeker of bounty to beseech the Glorious Bountiful One. When one supplicates to his Lord, turns to Him and seeks bounty from His Ocean, this supplication brings light to his heart, illumination to his sight, life to his soul and exaltation to his being. (qtd. in Esslemont 93)

As any spiritual obligation imposed on the Bahá’ís, also the obligation to pray should be understood in the light of the following words of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty” (KA 20, m 4). This concept seems implicit in the final words of the “Reunion Prayer”:

Verily, We have instructed and warned thee, that thou mayest attain unto the presence of thy Lord and mayest not be deprived of what is better for thee than the treasures of the heavens and the earth. If thou doest perform it, it is for thine own sake, and if thou doest neglect it, thy Lord, verily, can well dispense with all creatures. (28)

Bahá’í prayer also is a remembrance of God (*dhikru’lláh*), a remembrance that “cleanseth all things from defilement” (Bahá’u’lláh, *GW*B 294, sec. CXXXVI, m 1) and acts as “...a ladder of ascent for the believer” (Bahá’u’lláh, in *Importance*, sec. 1, no. X), “a healing medicine to the souls and a light to the hearts of men” (Bahá’u’lláh, in CC 2:228, no. 1732). In the “Reunion Prayer” He writes:

Then, detach me, o my God, from this world and from the world to come, cause me to enter the Paradise of Thy presence (liqá') and the Garden [Riḍván] of Thy mighty and luminous glory. O Lord! Blot out from my heart every remembrance (dhikr) except Thine, that I may arise to praise Thy Being between earth and heaven. (25)

If the worshipper attains to this condition he prays “only for the love of God, not because... [he] fear[s] Him or hell, or hope[s] for bounty or heaven...” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá’, qtd. in Esslemont 95), he is “associating with God” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, SWAB 201, no. 172), “is alone with God, converseth with Him, and acquireth bounties... he will obtain the confirmations of the Holy Spirit, and this will entirely obliterate love of self” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Importance*, sec. 2, no. XI). The idea of the communion with God is the central motif of the “Reunion Prayer,” whose recitation Bahá’u’lláh recommends to all those who wish “to attain to the pinnacle of grace and draw nigh unto the most exalted court” (T13).

In this condition the worshipper reaches “the kingdom of mystery, and the worship of the Supreme One.... [comes near] unto His threshold” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Importance*, sec. 2, no. XIII), “day by day... [his] awareness... increase[s], and, through the power of the knowledge of God,... [he rends] asunder the veil of error of the people of doubt” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Importance*, sec. 2, no. XVI). The attainment of awareness is part of the requests advanced in the “Reunion Prayer”: “Cause, moreover, the waters of knowledge to flow out from my mouth, in my recognition of Thy Self, the Merciful, that through it I may produce Thy proof unto such of Thy creatures as trembled on Thy manifest, radiant and undeviating path” (T23).

In this condition “the worshipper is delivered from the fire, and entereth the paradise of God’s good-pleasure” (SWB 77-8). For him now prayer is a need and a joy. In him the following two sentences by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are realized: “If one friend feels love for another, he will wish to say so. Though he knows that the friend is aware that he loves him, he will still wish to say so....” (qtd. in Esslemont 94), and also: “For a lover, there is no greater pleasure than to converse with his beloved, and for a seeker, there is no greater bounty than intimacy with the object of his desire” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Importance*, sec. 2, no. VII). He thus realizes exactly what Bahá’u’lláh suggested at the beginning of the “Reunion Prayer”:

Beware lest thou lookest at Me through the eyes of anyone

but Me and if thou wishest to know Me, look at Me through My eyes and thou wilt not know Me through anything but those, although thou ponderest to know Me till the end that none among the reckoners can reckon. (T12)

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