

The Bahá'í Worldview on Unity of Religions

“Progressive Revelation”: The Application of Principles and Insights from the History of Science¹

Jena Khadem Khodadad

The intent of this paper is to explore and discuss the Bahá'í “paradigm” on unity of religions, that is the fundamental Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation, in the context of the thesis proposed by Thomas Kuhn, in his classical work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*.^{2,3,4} This paper is organized in two parts:

- I. Discussion of the process of advancement of scientific knowledge through stages which according to Kuhn bring about a change in paradigm; this will employ an example from the history of science (the Copernican Revolution) as analyzed by Kuhn.
- II. Presentation of certain concepts inherent in the Bahá'í paradigm on unity of religions through the use of diagrams; this will be discussed in the context of the Copernican Revolution and the change in paradigm from a geocentric to heliocentric universe.

Introduction

Thomas Kuhn, an eminent philosopher of science, was the first to introduce the term “paradigm”. Paradigm comes from the Greek word, “paradigmia” which means pattern. Paradigm signifies our worldview; how we believe knowledge or systems work. The Oxford English Dictionary defines paradigm as “a pattern or model, an exemplar”. The word “paradigm” as used in this paper in respect to the Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation, denotes “the religious worldview” on unity of religions. The term “paradigm” has over time acquired various connotations and in some instances its application has become trivialized. However, the concept of paradigm as used by Kuhn is replete with significant insights. My intent is to apply the

concept of “paradigm” in this paper with the depth imparted to it by Thomas Kuhn.

Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* discusses the role of paradigms in advancement of scientific research and knowledge. This book is considered as one of the most significant books on the philosophy of science since it was first published in 1962, and subsequently in 1964 and 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* has been widely read (it has sold over a million copies) and has influenced scholars from numerous disciplines. It has generated much discussion and debate, and won praise as well elicited criticism. Some have hailed it as “monumental” while others have critiqued and rejected its central thesis. This book has thus stimulated extensive discourse leading to numerous other publications. These have, in turn, contributed to increased understanding in respective fields. This is indeed the hallmark of any significant publication. The terms “seminal” and “monumental” rightly apply to Kuhn’s work regardless of how one may view any of its possible shortcomings. Kuhn’s contributions, in particular in respect to the thesis of this paper, warrant in-depth consideration and reflection. Such reflections are bound to provide learning and insights heightening one’s understanding and appreciation of the Bahá’í paradigm of unity of religions.

Kuhn’s central thesis is that advances in scientific knowledge are essentially revolutionary. He believes that scientific research consists of long periods of “normal science” interrupted by a radical shift in paradigm whereby one paradigm is supplanted by a mutually exclusive one. This is tantamount to a revolution as it involves the overthrow of an old paradigm, an old regime, and its replacement with the new. The thesis of Kuhn has stimulated dialogues and in-depth discussions on whether advancements in scientific knowledge follows the revolutionary path or whether it is a process which is cumulative and hence evolutionary. A revolutionary process entails a “paradigm shift” whereby the paradigm undergoes a radical change. An evolutionary process entails “paradigm expansion” whereby the paradigm undergoes expansion through gradual accretion of knowledge. Kuhn’s enthusiastic supporters are numerous; among them is Howard Margolis⁵ who draws a relationship between a Kuhnian paradigm shift and a shift in well entrenched “habits of the mind”.

Many of those who have critiqued Kuhn’s view hold that advancement in scientific knowledge is cumulative and hence

evolutionary. Stephen Toulmin⁶ argues against Kuhn's thesis that advancement in science is revolutionary and holds that the process is in fact evolutionary. According to Toulmin's understanding of Kuhn, the revolutionary process implies that there is competition between paradigms which are mutually exclusive; thus with paradigm shift one paradigm replaces the other. Whereas the evolutionary process implies a cumulative process in conceptual change. Kafatos and Nadeau⁷ also argue that the process of advancement in science is cumulative and evolutionary. Hoyningen-Huene⁸ provides insightful critique and interpretation of certain points regarding the thesis presented by Kuhn. In a later publication, Kuhn⁹, acknowledges the cumulative and evolutionary process in the advance of science. Additionally, Kuhn also acknowledges in his foreword to the writing of Hoyningen-Huene¹⁰ some of this criticism. Notwithstanding such arguments, the work of Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* is significant as it provides valuable insights in the progression and advancement of knowledge.

The question of whether the process of advancement of science is evolutionary or revolutionary will not have a critical bearing on the discussions presented in this paper. In fact, it is likely that advances in knowledge have both characteristics; that is an evolutionary process with features which may exhibit revolutionary characteristics. Such a process may apply to the advances in science in certain fields and under certain conditions as well as to the Bahá'í paradigm of unity of religions known as the principle of "Progressive Revelation". Inherent within the principle of Progressive Revelation is a cumulative process and hence it is essentially an evolutionary process; nevertheless, certain factors impart to it also a revolutionary character. Thus the paradigm of Progressive Revelation is an evolutionary process with revolutionary features to which "paradigm shift" as well as "paradigm expansion" can apply. This matter will be taken up in the ensuing parts of this paper. The analysis and discussions of Kuhn are insightful and are in particular applicable to the thesis of this paper.

I. Advancement of Scientific Knowledge through Paradigms

Kuhn provides several examples from the history of science in order to explain and elucidate his thesis on "shift" in a

scientific paradigm. Among these, the example of “Copernican Revolution”, is appropriate and applicable to the thesis and discussions which will be presented in this paper. The Copernican Revolution was a tumultuous process which precipitated the overthrow of the geocentric model of universe and its replacement with a heliocentric model.

The Essential Stages of a Paradigm Shift

Kuhn identifies and describes several stages which, in general, take place when a paradigm shift, whereby a new paradigm replaces the established one.

He first emphasizes that paradigms are essential. Paradigms are created based on the known scientific achievements in a specific scientific community; they attempt to explain the findings, on which there is, in general, agreement among the scientists in a respective field. Paradigms are essential to scientific inquiry. They play a significant role in helping the scientists generate and formulate questions thus stimulating further inquiries and research. These lead to continuing scientific advancement and expansion in learning. Thus paradigms set in motion a dynamic process leading to escalating levels of research and expansion in knowledge.

The established paradigm generates questions and inquiries. Such inquiries lead to new observations and data. Accumulated data, in time, can result in what Kuhn calls “anomalies”; anomalies are puzzles. The emerging data can no longer fit into the pattern of thinking embodied in the established paradigm; thus they generate puzzles. Puzzles persist as they can no longer be explained in the context of the current paradigm. In time, anomalous observations, mount resulting in what Kuhn calls, a “crisis situation”. Kuhn emphasizes that the crisis itself must be of such magnitude as to produce tension in the system preparing it for a shift in paradigm. Ultimately, further investigations into new findings, bring about or may even force a paradigm shift. Thus the process becomes revolutionary as the new emergent paradigm replaces the old established one. It is a change in regime, a coup d'état. The new paradigm necessitates a reconstruction of the original facts and assumptions.

However, such a paradigm shift is not a smooth transition as the emergent new paradigm faces opposition and resistance. The resistance comes from those in the scientific community

who are committed to the old paradigm. There are desperate efforts to hold on to the established paradigm by attempting to modify and articulate it differently. Additionally, significant challenges are posed by the new paradigm; as what is now required is a retooling, a new language, new methodologies and a whole new mindset. These challenges, when met, can induce significant advancement in scientific knowledge.

Kuhn goes on to emphasize that the acceptance and adoption of the new paradigm requires the rejection of the older established one. When the new paradigm is adopted and assimilated it is then that in the context of the new paradigm, the scientists acquire a new way of looking at data, a whole new worldview. Those observations and findings which seemed anomalous can now be explained; puzzles are solved. Even the old data take on their expanded and true meaning.

The Copernican Revolution

The “Copernican Revolution” is, in particular, a suitable example for the application of the stages described by Kuhn in process of a paradigm shift. Furthermore, it is also cogent to the discussion of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation (to be covered in the second part of this paper).

The Copernican Revolution illustrates the implications of various stages, described by Kuhn, which lead to a shift in the established geocentric paradigm of universe. The Ptolemaic paradigm of the universe had long ceased to make sense. It was based on a pattern of thinking which had created dilemmas and inconsistencies; the literal understanding of certain biblical verses on Creation and the Christian doctrine of salvation posed barriers which seemed impenetrable.

The understanding of cosmos has been a quest ever since the emergence of man on planet earth. There has always been an urge to explain the mystery of creation, in a comprehensible manner in accordance with the state of knowledge of the time. Explanation of the creation of universe was fundamental to Greeks and Romans as well as to many religions. The Judeo-Christian view is that the universe had a distinct beginning in a not very distant time in the past. According to the literal statements in the Old Testament, the creation of the universe took place in seven days. St. Augustine, accepted the date of approximately 5000 B.C. as the date of creation of universe; this he based on his understanding of the verses in the Book of

Genesis. He argued that time is a property of universe that God created, thus time could not have existed before the beginning of universe.

The Geocentric Paradigm of the Universe

Aristotle in 340 B.C. argued the sphericity of earth. He believed that the Earth was stationary and that the sun, the moon and the stars orbited around it in circles. This idea was further elaborated by Ptolemy, the Greek astronomer in 140 A.D. into a complete cosmological model. He formulated the old paradigm of Earth at the center of universe with moon, sun, and planets revolving around it in circular orbits. This was based on Plato's view that the perfect form of motion was the circular one. Earth was then at the center surrounded by eight spheres that carried the moon, the sun, the stars and the five known planets. The outermost sphere carried the fixed stars. What lay beyond was not made clear as it was not thought to be part of observable universe.

Ptolemy's paradigm was conveniently supported, promoted and adopted by the Christian church as the picture of universe that was in accordance with the Scriptures. It reinforced and was in line with the literal understanding of the Bible. Such a model reinforced religious sentiments and was compatible with the Christian doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ for the significant planet Earth, with its unique position of centrality in the entire cosmos; for around it revolved all other heavenly bodies including the Sun itself. The Ptolemaic paradigm of universe also provided a model for the placement of heaven. The moon at one time had been considered the residence of the souls of those who had passed away and are there waiting to return for rebirth. Dante's Divine Comedy was based on such a model of universe.

It is of interest and puzzling that even the learned of Islam seemed to believe in the Ptolemaic theory of universe although certain verses in the Qur'an pointed to the contrary¹¹. One of these verses¹² states, "*The sun moves in a fixed place,*" This clearly indicates that the sun is fixed and moves around an axis.

Another Quranic verse¹³ states, "And each star moves in its own heaven."

The Paradigm Shift to Heliocentric Universe

The early Church found the cosmology of Aristotle and Ptolemy convenient. No conflict arose as long as the language of science was not in significant variance with their beliefs. However, conflicts emerged in time. Anomalies surfaced and accumulated. Increasing new observations and data were presented by notable scientists such as Giordano Bruno, Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler, Galileo, and others. These posed puzzles which could not fit into the context of the Ptolemaic model of universe. Data presented by Copernicus in the sixteenth century showed that the sun is the center of the universe. In time, such mounting anomalies precipitated what is known as the "Copernican Revolution". The story of Genesis no longer seemed to make sense.

The resistance to the new heliocentric model of universe was vehement. Even when the model explained the new findings it was still not accepted by the establishment. When Galileo gathered evidence in support of the new model of universe with the invention of telescope, he was denounced by the professors in the university. He went before the Inquisition and was forced to "abjure, curse and detest" these absurd ideas. Giordano Bruno was burnt as a heretic in 1600 A.D., because among other things, he taught that the earth revolved around the sun.

The resistance to the new model of universe was such that desperate attempts were made to retain the geocentric model of universe. Although observations had shown that movement of planets were not in smooth circles, they tried to address the new data by introducing into the established paradigm absurd accommodations, such as inclusion of epicycles into the orbits of movement of planets. Such attempts at retaining the geocentric model of universe persisted for centuries.

Mounting anomalies and inconsistencies finally forced the paradigm to shift. The Ptolemaic paradigm of a geocentric universe was replaced by the Copernican paradigm of a heliocentric universe. The process was tumultuous; similar to a revolution, it resulted in overthrow of the regime of the established paradigm. The adoption and assimilation of the paradigm of heliocentric universe imparted an expanded worldview. The new data now fit into the structure of the new paradigm. The old data also fit! The old data and facts remained unchanged; however, they took on their true

placement and expanded meaning in the context of the new paradigm. The new paradigm served to stimulate further observations and findings.

Learning and Insights from the Copernican Revolution

The Copernican Revolution provides important learning and insights. An extensive discussion of these insights are beyond the scope of this paper. However few points warrant special emphasis.

The process of advancement in the knowledge of universe through the Copernican Revolution followed an apparent revolutionary path; this can be attributed, to a large extent, to the barriers which were posed by religious dogmas. It is reasonable to think that the paradigm shift which took place with the Copernican Revolution, would have expanded the mindset to the true meaning and implication of the scriptures. Are they to be taken in a literal sense? Galileo, in his letter of 1615, to the Grand Duchess, Christine, argued that Biblical writers had neither intended nor wanted to convey scientific information about the natural universe. Opening up of the mindset to the inherent meaning of the scriptures must surely have relevance to the paradigm of unity or religions.

Additionally, the advancement in the knowledge of cosmos, also had an evolutionary feature as it was the result of accretion of findings. The revolutionary part of this process was unusually lengthy. It was not until Sir Isaac Newton in 1687, published his basic laws of gravity in his book, Principia, that the new model was accepted and the shift of paradigm was finally completed. The stages described and analyzed by Kuhn provide insights on the underlying factors which constituted barriers to the acceptance of the new paradigm. However, once that resistance was overcome and the paradigm was adopted and assimilated, the process took on an evolutionary course. It paved the way to new areas of research. Consequently, it has taken us beyond the heliocentric universe to a universe of superclusters of galaxies in a vast universe among many universes. It has opened vistas of discoveries, and undreamt of new possibilities. Opening up of new horizons regarding the universe must surely have its counterpart in the universe of religions.

II. Advancement of Religious Knowledge through Paradigm of Unity of Religions (Progressive Revelation)

The thesis of Kuhn has been widely employed in fields outside the natural sciences. It is of particular value to apply his analysis to the field of religion. Science and religion are two dimensions of reality. The findings of science, whose domain is the world of matter, are not absolute but relative and progressive. The revelation of religious truth, whose domain is the world of spirit, is also relative; it has infinite scope in its essence but its revelation is progressive. It is important to note that the process of advancement of scientific knowledge relates to the physical reality and its manifestation in the phenomenal world; whereas the process of advancement in the revelation of divine truth is related to the divine reality and its manifestation is through the divine educators. The former is investigated by scientists and the latter is revelation emanating from the ultimate reality, God. Both science and religion, however, are facets of reality.

The profound insights derived from the Copernican revolution, and the essential stages entailed in that process can be applied to the Bahá'í worldview of unity of religions (principle of Progressive Revelation). Kuhn's thesis provides novel insights regarding the nature of the challenges and the opposition associated with various stages of a paradigm shift. Thus the Copernican Revolution serves as an example for discussion of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation. There are similarities between the two processes in respect to: the stages involved in paradigm shift or paradigm expansion; the insights they both hold; and that both are affected by the implications of religious dogmas.

The Progressive Revelation

The worldview (paradigm) prevalent among the followers of religions is that their respective religion has exclusive hold on God's absolute truth and that all others are bereft of that knowledge. Furthermore, they hold the conviction that their religion provides the only path to salvation and that all others are bereft of it. These beliefs are based on the limited and literal understandings of the respective scriptures.

Such a limited paradigm of religious truth adopted by a particular religion may have been more acceptable at a time in the course of history of humankind when people were geographically isolated from one another. Under such conditions this paradigm may have served its adherents as it induced inspiration, focus, and was relevant to their particular needs.

Rising Anomalies and Puzzles

However, with the passage of time the world has emerged out of isolation. Increasing possibilities and opportunities of this global age have generated anomalies and puzzles; these can no longer be addressed by any paradigm which is limited and does not have answers to the challenges of a world on the verge of a planetary civilization. Increasing interaction among people, cultures and religions generate their own set of puzzles. These have accumulated posing conflicts which can not be resolved by the prevailing paradigm of exclusivity of truth held by one religion.

Technological advances have resulted in rapid transportation, communication and mass immigrations. As a consequence, people of diverse ethnicities, cultures and religious backgrounds have been brought into close proximity. Significant inter-religious exposures have been possible in this global age. We have the opportunity to associate with and establish friendships with those from the Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Jewish, and Zoroastrian backgrounds. Thus we have become increasingly aware of other religions; of the nobility and truths inherent in their teachings, of the transformation in character such truths can induce and generate in their followers. The awareness of other religions can inspire study of their respective scriptures. Previously, if one studied religions other than one's own, it would have been most likely through an occasional course on comparative religions. Such studies often compared religions in reference to, for example, Christianity.

There are questions that now arise. For example, "How does one reconcile in the context of the paradigm of exclusivity of salvation, the mystical sentiments of numerous twentieth century physicists with the beautiful spiritual writings of the Buddhists? Such were the probing questions which were raised by the participants of the Second Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1993. Several of the major presenters in that Conference were struggling with such anomalies and

puzzles when placed in the confines of an old paradigm of exclusivity. It was impossible to participate in those sessions and not pose and reflect on numerous such questions. The paradigm of exclusivity of Truth and salvation was workable at a time and in a world characterized by geographical isolation. However, no longer. No paradigm which claims to hold absolute religious truth and exclusive salvation can accommodate the puzzling observations and needs of our times. Surely, the followers of other religions must also have a grasp of the truth. Their sacred texts are uplifting and also inculcate nobility of character. We can rightly ask, whether their scriptures also emanate from the divine source? Are they deprived of salvation? Here, we are faced with major puzzles.

Those of us who have hitherto held the belief that one religion holds the exclusive truth and the only route to salvation, are faced with such mounting questions and must consider whether we can provide a satisfying solution. This poses a major dilemma. How can we uphold the prevailing paradigm of religious truth centered around one religion as the exclusive possessor of Truth and salvation? Is this paradigm of exclusivity meaningful and workable? Such observations and questions pose challenges to church instituted doctrines.

On one hand any attempt to fit these anomalies into the limited paradigm of exclusivity of salvation introduces yet greater complexity. On the other hand, viewing these in the context of Bahá'í paradigm of unity of religions provides viable and refreshing solutions to the puzzles.

Another anomalous observation of our particular times arises from the expanded knowledge of our universe; a universe encompassing countless superclusters of galaxies, each harboring numerous galaxies and each galaxy in turn with numerous solar systems with their own planets. This raises the inevitable question: Are there other solar systems with planets like our planet which are capable of harboring intelligent life? Are these intelligent beings also engraven with the image of God? Is salvation also open to them? Such questions can inevitably take us once again to the doctrine of exclusivity of salvation. Any limited paradigm which applies only to our planet has major inconsistencies.

Crisis situation

Such mounting anomalies have reached a point which Kuhn describes, a “crisis situation”; the crisis confronts and poses challenge to the prevailing paradigm of exclusivity of truth and salvation. How can these be accommodated in the context of a paradigm which may have worked well when cultures and religions were geographically isolated and the knowledge of universe was limited? How can we explain these findings and observations in an increasingly interdependent world? In order to flourish spiritually as well as materially in a multi-religious world community we are compelled to expand our paradigm and with it transform our worldview.

The Bahá'í Paradigm of Unity of Religions

The Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation is a dynamic and viable substitute paradigm; it provides a major expansion in one's worldview of religions. The paradigm of unity of religions as presented by the Bahá'í Faith, affirms that divine truth is absolute and that its revelation over time through the Manifestations of God (divine educators) is relative and progressive. God's knowledge has been revealed over time progressively through Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. All of these great religions are from the same source; they are interrelated and their missions are interconnected. They all encompass the same essence, a common core which runs through all of them. These Divine Educators bring inspiration for the regeneration of the individual and society; and provide solutions for the urgent needs of the time. All of the great religions of the world come together at this point in the course of human history when the planet has become one interdependent entity; thus the needs and requirements of all now merge into one. This requires the new and expanded paradigm of a common Faith which can acknowledge and accept the validity of all the religions of the world. The Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation provides a dynamic worldview. Its specific mission is to inspire the transformation of humankind and guide it toward the realization of oneness of the human race and a planetary civilization.

Presentation of Progressive Revelation through the Use of Diagrams

Here, I would like to explain certain key features of the Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation through the use of several diagrams (see end of article). It is my hope to convey my understanding of certain of its important concepts. Nevertheless, I have an acute awareness that such mode of presentation has its own inherent limitations and that no diagrammatic representation can adequately convey a spiritual principle which is at once mystical, multidimensional, profound and dynamic. However, the responses to my use of such diagrams in various settings have been encouraging. Thus, one can only surmise, based on the level of response and the ensuing discussions, that this mode of presentation through use of diagrams can be of value in serving to elucidate, albeit in a limited way, certain aspects of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation. More importantly, such diagrams have served as springboards in stimulating further discussions and critique leading in turn to expanded understanding of such a dynamic paradigm. In this process, I have personally reaped the results and remain its greatest beneficiary.

Figure 1 (at end), is a diagrammatic representation of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation showing continuing progression in disclosure of divine truth over time. The circles (seen in this figure as ovals) represent revelation through successive dispensations brought by the divine educators: Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Twin Manifestations, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. These religions all include the same core of truth, represented in this diagram by the symbol of the radiant sun. That core relates to a divine reality which is infinite. The Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation upholds that the disclosure of divine truth through the divine educators over time is in proportion and in response to the requirements of time (as well as place).

Figure 2, is a diagrammatic representation of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation. This diagram is similar to the previous figure; however it is a rendition which draws attention to the essential connection between the divine dispensations. Thus it underscores the interconnection and linkages among religions. The revelation of God's Truth through divine educators continues on into the future. Bahá'u'lláh has made it very clear that His revelation is not final and that it will be continued through future

dispensations. The dashed curved line in this diagram represents this important key point. Thus the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation addresses a major problem which has caused so much contention and animosity in the past. This has been a misunderstanding due to the perceived exclusivity of salvation in the Church instituted doctrine of salvation and the finality of the revelation to Muhammad in Islam. These have been major barriers leading to fundamentalism, fanaticism, persecutions and brutality in the name of religion.

Figure 3, is a diagrammatic representation of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation. This diagram is similar to Figure 1. It focuses on the common features of religions. This diagram attempts to call attention to the need for a different perspective, a different point of view in looking at religions. Please note that the rotation of the successive circles (representing dispensations/religions) at a 45° angle around the axis of their common core (represented by the sun) gives us the figure inserted in the upper right corner. This inserted figure represents a view of religions showing them as concentric circles, surrounding a common core at their very center; the core is represented by the sun. This common core is their divine center. We can obtain the perspective represented by the inserted figure, only when we refine our point of view; that is if we look directly on, focused on that inner essence, through the core (similar to the rotation of 45° degree angle, as indicated above). This can serve as an effective **metaphor** for the use of perspective when viewing religions; **that is to look directly with undeviating focus on the core**. It is then that we begin to see that all of these great religions are in essence, one. They are all from the same divine source and they surround the same reality.

Figure 4, is a diagrammatic representation of the Unified Paradigm of Religions. This figure is an enlargement of the insert in figure 3, which was obtained by rotation of the figure at 45° angle around the axis of its central core. This diagram underscores the common features shared by all religions, specifically in two respects: a). The concentric circles all encompass the same radiant common core of the infinite reality (represented by the sun); this was discussed in the context of the previous figure b). The common areas (the overlaps) shared by religions. They share common areas (overlaps) but also include additional portions. The additional portions are in response to the needs and challenges of respective times; the mission of religion is to inspire the

regeneration of the individual and the society as well as to provide solutions to the challenges and urgent needs of the time. This paradigm emphasizes the cumulative and hence the evolutionary aspect of this process. The revelation of the divine truth which is imparted through religions is progressive. The Bahá'í paradigm of continuing Progressive Revelation provides a whole new way of looking at the diversity of religions. It imbues one with a new worldview.

The core inherent in all of the religions of the world is like that radiant inner reality depicted in figures 1 through 4. The core includes, such divine truths as belief in God, the soul of man, the immortality of the soul, the kingdoms of God, as well as some other beliefs. The core beliefs are also revealed to man over time progressively in greater and greater measure (see Figures 1 and 3). For example, Bahá'u'lláh has revealed writings about realities such as God, the soul, the stages of the journey of the soul, the immortality of the soul, the spiritual worlds of God, and other truths in a significantly larger proportion than that which had been imparted through the past revelations. Thus the disclosure of divine knowledge regarding the core truths also increases progressively with each successive Revelation.

Additionally, this figure calls our attention to the continuation of Revelation into the future. The outward directed arrows in figure 4, emphasize that revelation through the divine educators will continue on into the future, after the dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh,. Thus according to the worldview of unity of religions presented by Bahá'u'lláh, there can never be a claim to finality in revelation. God's truth is infinite and cannot be given in totality through any one dispensation. Further, the needs and challenges of an ever developing and changing world require continuation of divine guidance.

Figure 5, is a diagrammatic representation of Progressive Revelation over time and space through the major religions of the world. The Hindu, and Buddhist religions are shown, separate in space from Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, Moslem, the Bábí and Bahá'í religions.

The Hindu and Buddhist Faiths appeared in a part of the world which was geographically isolated from that part of the world from which arose the Zoroastrian, the Jewish, the Christian, the Moslem, the Bábí and the Bahá'í Faiths. However, at this juncture in history of humankind when the planet has

become one entity through the advances in science and technology, all of these religion now come together in one common Faith. Note the line connecting the Hindu and Buddhist religions to the Bábí and Bahá'í Faith. The specific mission of the Bahá'í Faith is to address the urgent needs of humankind at a time when geographical isolation no longer poses a hindrance. Our world is on the verge of globalization with its attendant urgent challenges. These challenges must be addressed and guided toward the realization of a viable and sustainable planetary civilization. A viable paradigm of unity of religions, as presented by the Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation, is an absolute essential. It constitutes the framework for the Bahá'í convictions, actions and worldview.

The Buddhist, the Hindu, the Zoroastrian, the Jewish, the Christian, and the Moslem dispensations are under the Adamic cycle with Muhammad, the Seal of the prophets ending this cycle (see figure 5). The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh initiated the Bahá'í Cycle (see figure 5),

In reflecting on Progressive Revelation, it is important to be cognizant of the implications of the factors of geographical and cultural milieu to which each divine educator brought His message. The divine educators came to differing tribes and cultures who were at differing levels of development and receptivity. For example, Muhammad came to dissenting tribes of idol worshipers, whereas Jesus came to the Jewish people who were monotheistic. We can appreciate the relative magnitude of advancement (progression) in divine revelation which took place through Muhammad in isolated Arabia amidst backward peoples and tribes. They were idolaters and became monotheistic. The revelation of Muhammad induced in these people a significant level of advancement which some view as a quantum leap.

Selections from the Bahá'í authoritative writings on Progressive Revelation

The Bahá'í paradigm of continuing Progressive Revelation encompasses salient points and certain key concepts conveyed through the following selections from Bahá'í authoritative writings through the following passages.

The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh ... is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive

process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the nonessential aspects of their doctrines, and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society....¹⁴

His Cause, they have already demonstrated, stands identified with, and revolves around, the principle of the organic unity of mankind as representing the consummation of the whole process of human evolution. This final stage in this stupendous evolution, they assert, is not only necessary but inevitable, that it is gradually approaching, and that nothing short of the celestial potency with which a divinely ordained Message can claim to be endowed can succeed in establishing it.¹⁵

The Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh... unhesitatingly acknowledges itself to be but one link in the chain of continually Progressive Revelations, supplements their teachings with such laws and ordinances as conform to the imperative needs, and are dictated by the growing receptivity, of a fast evolving and constantly changing society, and proclaims its readiness and ability to fuse and incorporate the contending sects and factions into which they have fallen into a universal Fellowship, functioning within the framework, and in accordance with the precepts, of a divinely conceived, a world-unifying, a world-redeeming Order.¹⁶

The Resistance to the Paradigm

The Bahá'í Paradigm of continuing Progressive Revelation was articulated and proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh in 1863. This paradigm has been met with resistance, opposition and rejection. The resistance may be compared, albeit, at a heightened level, to the opposition and resistance which confronted the shift of the paradigm of universe from the geocentric to the heliocentric.

Much of this resistance and opposition can be attributed to attachments and entrenchments in the paradigm of exclusivity

of truth as held by one religion. The implications of the process of paradigm shift from the paradigm of exclusivity to the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation are intriguing. Such a paradigm shift similar to that which took place with the Copernican Revolution has implications of the element of religious dogma which was based on literal understanding of the scriptures. Again in this context, for the Christians, this is due to the Church instituted doctrine of exclusivity of salvation through Jesus Christ and for the Moslems it is the finality of God's revelation with Muhammad.

Thus there continues to be rejection and opposition to the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation. Such rejection and vehement opposition have been to the extent of persecution, imprisonments, and exile of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, who presented this paradigm in mid nineteenth century. The intensity of persecutions, burnings, imprisonments and martyrdom of the proponents of the Bahá'í paradigm have persisted to this day. Over 20,000 who adopted and defended this paradigm were put to death. Such rejection and resistance are reminiscent, to some extent, of the opposition to the heliocentric universe.

Attempts are made to accommodate solutions to the puzzles which face us within the context of the structure, methodologies and restricted mindset of the old paradigm. This is reminiscent of the attempts which were made to retain the geocentric model of universe by accommodating the new data on the length of orbits around the sun through the introduction of epicycles. It did not work. Likewise attempts to accommodate the requirements for unity of religions in the context of the old paradigm of exclusivity of truth does not work. The established structures, systems and organizations are defective and incapable of addressing the unification of religions and the urgent needs of our global age. Attempts to force fit the needs of our times into the established paradigm can only create further friction causing the breakage of its framework. Nothing can work which is short of a total acceptance and appreciation of the divine origin of all religions and the continuing progression of religious truth.

Adoption of Paradigm

In order to adopt this expanded paradigm of religions barriers must be overcome. Howard Margolis¹⁷ considers the well entrenched "habits of the mind", the barriers to a new

paradigm. These well entrenched habits of the mind include the religious dogmas and the literal understanding of scriptures. Additionally, there are needs and challenges associated with the adoption of the Bahá'í worldview. The paradigm of Progressive Revelation requires adoption of a whole new mindset; a restructuring, a reeducation, a retooling, and a whole new language. New methodologies hitherto unknown, must be developed.

Thoughtful reflection on the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation, is compelling that its adoption can have powerful implications. It imbues one with a new worldview; all of a sudden beliefs and doctrines take on their true and expanded meaning. Furthermore, the accumulating anomalies and puzzles which have arisen in the context of the prevailing paradigms of religions can find their resolution.

Assimilation of Paradigm

When the expanded paradigm of Progressive Revelation is adopted and assimilated one is able to overcome the barrier of religious dogmas on exclusivity of truth and salvation limited to one religion. It is then that the anomalies and puzzles find their solution. Assimilation of this paradigm is tantamount to opening up of new vistas, vast horizons and new undreamt of possibilities. The Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation has now been assimilated by over some six million inhabitants of our planet. Its transformative power has been set in motion radiating out from this relatively small but significant percentage of humanity. When this paradigm is adopted by a critical mass of the inhabitant of this planet, it is then that a fuller measure of its transformative power will be felt.

Discussion

Comparisons between The paradigm of Progressive Revelation and The Paradigm of the Heliocentric Universe

The paradigm of Progressive Revelation can be compared and contrasted in certain respects with the paradigm of the heliocentric universe.

The paradigm of universe is based on scientific discoveries and the paradigm of Progressive Revelation is based on revelations whose source is the divine reality. Religion and

science are in harmony and from the same source of knowledge; however they differ in their domains, their language and modes of expression. Scientific advancement is brought about by scientists reaching out to uncover the mysteries of outer phenomena. Religious progression and advancement are brought by the Divine Educators who provide to man guidance from that ultimate reality, God.

The following quotes from Bahá'í sacred Scriptures warrant in-depth reflection:

Science may be likened to a mirror wherein the images of the mysteries of outer phenomena are reflected. It brings forth and exhibits to us in the arena of knowledge all the product of the past. It links together past and present".... Science is the governor of nature and its mysteries, the one agency by which man explores the institutions of material creation. (Abdu'l-Bahá' in BWF 242)

Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive. (Abdu'l-Bahá' in BWF 224)

The stage of acceptance of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation bears similarities to the stage of acceptance of the paradigm of heliocentric universe (in reference to the thesis of Kuhn). Both were confronted with the barriers of religious dogmas and the literal understanding of scriptures. The heliocentric model of universe was finally accepted after centuries. The paradigm of Progressive Revelation which was presented in 1863 by Bahá'u'lláh continues to face this barrier. Both paradigms have elicited vehement oppositions and reactions from those entrenched and committed to the previously established paradigms.

The adoption of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation confers to each religion its rightful place; not at the center, but rather as a planet revolving around that center, God, the Sun of Truth. The Copernican revolution provides a powerful metaphor. With the adoption of paradigm of a heliocentric universe things took on new meaning. Earth was no longer at the center of universe with the moon, the known planets as well as the Sun itself, revolving around it; rather earth was one planet revolving around the sun. The sun was no longer a planet revolving around the earth; rather it was at the very center. The meaning and significance of the sun and planet

earth changed radically. Such a transition had profound implications introducing a significantly higher level of comprehension. It changed and transformed Earth centeredness into Sun centeredness.

Similarly the assimilation of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation, can bring about a major transformation in our worldview from exclusivity to inclusivity of truth. The different religions find their proper placements as planets revolving around the Sun of Truth, God. The transition of worldview from dogma centeredness to God centeredness can bring about a profound transformation. The divine reality, God, takes on its rightful place at the very center with religions coursing along their orbits around it!

When paradigms change our world view changes. We begin to see things in a whole new way. We see them in a different light. We begin to see what we did not see before. This is tantamount to a major transformation; it is a gestalt switch. The work of the Hanover Institute provides an interesting metaphor. In experiments when the subject wears a goggle with inverting lenses, initially he becomes disoriented for the world is seen upside down; however some time after, the visual field inverts over and the world is seen right side up¹⁸. A transformation has taken place in visual gestalt. When paradigms change our worldview changes.

It is important to emphasize that with the adoption of the new paradigm, old data can be explained and confirmed taking on new meaning. In the context of the new paradigm the fundamental facts remain unchanged. The fundamental facts about the universe did not change with the shift in paradigm of universe. The fundamental truth underlying religions does not change in the context of the Bahá'í paradigm of unity of religions. The truth does not change!

The process of advancement in knowledge of universe, specifically through the Copernican Revolution, demonstrates features which can be compared to that of the Bahá'í paradigm of unity of religions (Progressive Revelation). Both have revolutionary features although they are essentially evolutionary processes. The knowledge of the universe has advanced through observations, findings and collection of data; thus these findings have been cumulative and therefore evolutionary. The Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation upholds that the revelation of God's truth to man is progressive; hence in essence, it is

cumulative and thus evolutionary. However, the implications of religious dogmas introduce to it a *de facto* revolutionary feature. The revolutionary features of both, the heliocentric model of universe and the Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation can be attributed, to a great extent, to the implications of religious dogmas. This point was discussed in a previous section of this paper.

It is important to note that the resistance to the change of paradigm of universe from geocentric to heliocentric, persisted over several centuries. However, after that first crucial shift, that coup d'état, had taken place, research and advancement in science of universe took on an evolutionary path leading over time to smooth expansion of paradigms. The rate of accumulation of data on the knowledge of universe has since increased by leaps and bounds. Similarly, it is anticipated that once that initial resistance to the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation is overcome and once the essential tools and methodologies develop, then the process leading to the adoption of the paradigm of unity of religions will show significant acceleration.

It must be borne in mind that the term revolutionary is often used when the discovery is such that it marks a turning point in the particular field. There are numerous examples of such revolutionary processes. In the field of biology, the acceptance of the structure of DNA as shown through the data of Watson and Crick as well as those of other scientists, revolutionized the field. In the domain of religion, the paradigm of unity of religions as presented by the Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation, has significant implications such that it can revolutionize mindsets and civilizations. This, in particular, has profound implications at this critical juncture in history when humankind is facing the challenges of globalization.

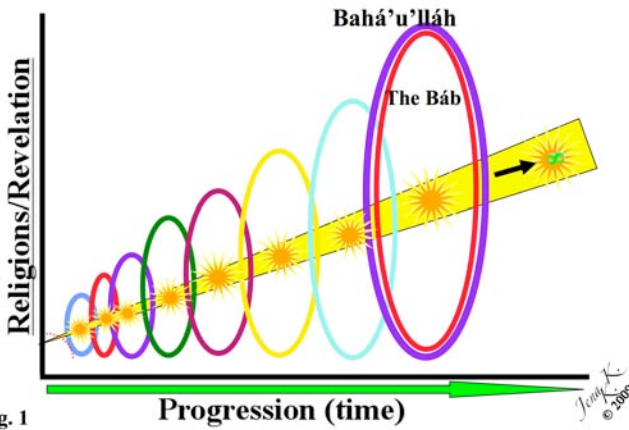
Concluding Comments

In recent times, the urgent need for addressing the rising religious fanaticism and fundamentalism is deeply felt by many. There is increase in interfaith activities, groups, and organizations with the noble mission of improving inter-religious dialogues and fellowship. This, they see as a solution in addressing the conflicts which have arisen in our global society. All these attempts underscore the urgency in addressing the ever intensifying need for a vital, viable,

sustainable and an all encompassing worldview of unity of religions. There is a dire need for a paradigm which can unify all religions. The need for such a paradigm has been there for some time. Leo Tolstoy, the eminent Russian writer and philosopher of the early twentieth century was among those who wished to resolve the question of religious differences and even contemplated to construct a universal religion which would encompass all religions. However, the enormity of the task is such that nothing short of a force with the potency to transmute mindsets and elevate human consciousness, is capable of bringing about a transformation of such magnitude. One may ask, what agency has such potency?

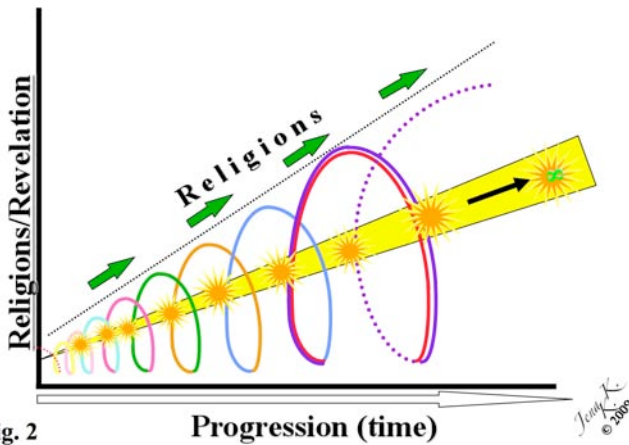
The Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation is a candidate paradigm for bringing about the unification of religions, cultures and nation in this global age. The acceptance and adoption of the Bahá'í paradigm of unity of religions can provide solutions to the dilemmas and needs of our time. Yet, its acceptance continues to follow a long and difficult path strewn with resistance and barriers. However, once it is adopted and assimilated it is bound to bring about a major transformation in our global society.

Legends to Figures 1 through 5



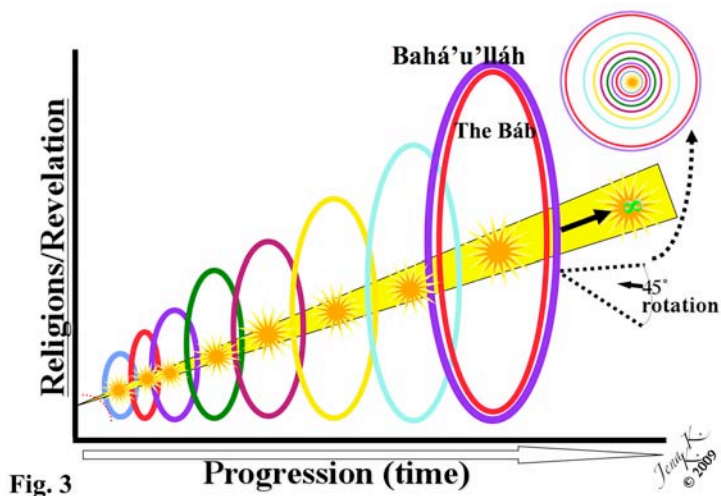
Paradigm of Progressive Revelation showing progression over time

This figure is a diagrammatic representation of the Bahá'í paradigm of Progressive Revelation showing continuing progression in divine truth. The circles represent successive revelation of God's truth through the divine educators: Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and the Twin Manifestations, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. (labeled) The core, that essence of divine truth within each religion, is represented by the symbol of the sun.



The essential connection between the divine educators

This figure is a diagrammatic representation of the paradigm. This diagram is similar to Fig. 1, but this rendering emphasizes the interconnection and the essential linkages between the religions brought by the divine educators. The dashed curved line indicates continuity of revelation into the future.



Features shared by religions: A fresh perspective

This figure is similar to Figure 1 but from different angle of view. The successive circles (representing dispensations/religions) are rotated 45° around the axis of their common core. This results in the figure shown in insert at the upper right hand corner of this figure. The inserted figure shows those religions (dispensations) as concentric circles containing a common corner; this is shown by the image of sun at the center of concentric circles. This concentric circle provides a fresh perspective on the paradigm of Progressive Revelation.

Unified Paradigm of Religions “Progressive Revelation”

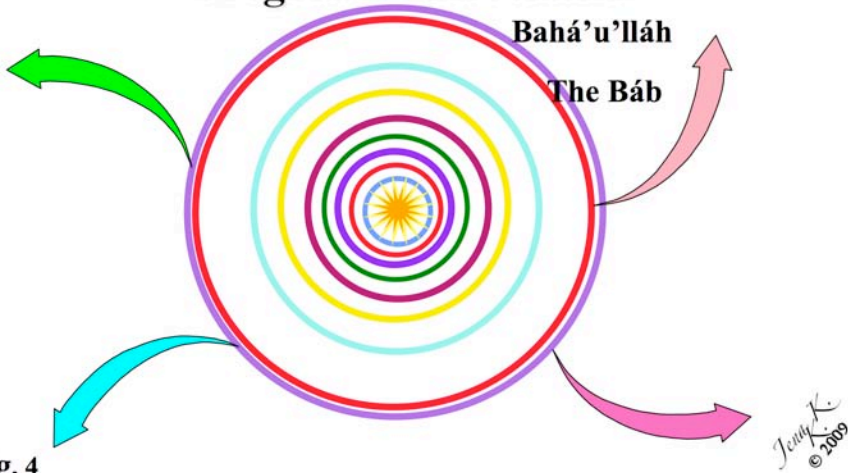


Fig. 4

Unified Paradigm of Religions

Fig. 4 is an enlargement of the insert from Fig. 3, which was obtained by rotation of the successive circles (representing dispensations/religions) at 45° around the axis of their central common core. This figure represents concentric circles all encompassing the same common core (represented by the Sun at the center) of the infinite Divine reality. The circles include common areas and overlaps which are shared by consecutive circles. The outward directed arrows emphasize that continuation of revelation through the divine educators will continue into the future.

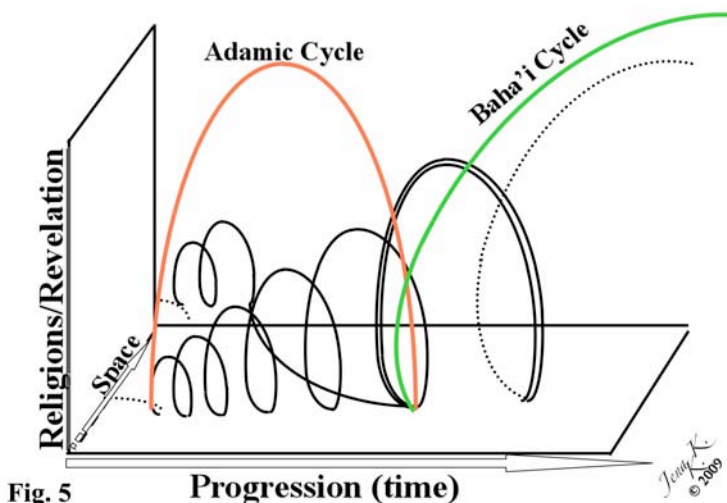


Fig. 5

Progression (time)

Paradigm of Progressive Revelation showing progression over time, space

This figure is a diagrammatic representation of the major religions of the world over time and space of which we have record. These religions arose in different parts of the world and have been in the past geographically isolated. The Buddhist and the Hindu arose from India and the Zoroastrian, the Jewish, the Christian, the Moslem, the Bábí and the Bahá'í Faiths arose in the Middle East and the Arabian peninsula. Please note the connecting linkage (at this point in time) of the Hindu and Buddhist religions to the twin manifestations the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. The Buddhist, the Hindu, the Zoroastrian, the Jewish, the Christian, and the Moslem dispensations are under the Adamic cycle with Muhammad the seal, the end of that cycle. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh initiated the Bahá'í Cycle.

NOTES

Author's note: I want to express my appreciation to Dr. Feridun Khodadadeh for his encouragement and interest in the ideas presented in this paper. Our discussions and discourses on science helped form my resolve to present the Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation in the context of Kuhnian paradigm shift and expansion, and in particular to use diagrams in my attempt to explain the central concepts of the Progressive Revelation, such as a mystical, multi dimensional and dynamic principle. To him I am indebted.

¹ This paper was organized for the 2008 session of Irfán Colloquium to honor the centennial of the publication of *Some Answered Questions*.

The essential relationship between the manifestations of God and the principle of “Progressive Revelation” are major themes in the talks and writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá including several chapters of *Some Answered Questions* (SAQ). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in Part I, of SAQ, entitled, “Influence of the Prophets in the Evolution of Humanity” (chapters 3 to 9), extols the divine Educators, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh and in Part III, entitled, “On the Powers and Conditions of the Manifestations of God” (chapter 41), He refers to the universal cycles of divine manifestations.

² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962)

³ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964)

⁴ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Second Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970)

⁵ Howard Margolis, *Paradigms and Barriers, How Habits of Mind Govern Scientific Belief*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993)

⁶ Stephen Toulmin, *Human Understanding, The collective use and evaluation of Concepts*, (Princeton University press, 1972)

⁷ Kafatos and Nadeau, see introduction to *The Conscious Universe: Parts and Whole in Physical Reality*, (Springer, second Edition, 2001)

⁸ Paul Hoyningen-Huene, *Reconstructing Scientific Revolution*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993)

⁹ Thomas S. Kühn, “Reflections on my critics” in: *Criticism and Growth of Knowledge*, Eds. I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave, 231-238. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

¹⁰ Paul Hoyningen-Huene, *Reconstructing Scientific Revolution*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1993)

¹¹ Abdu’l-Baha, see *Some Answered Questions*, p. 23.

¹² Qur’an 36:37

¹³ Qur’an 36:38

¹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. v

¹⁵ Shoghi Effendi, Extracts from the United States Bahá’í News

¹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 100

¹⁷ Howard Margolis, *Paradigms and Barriers, How Habits of Mind Govern Scientific Belief*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993)

¹⁸ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Second Edition, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970)